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OR, The Rival Rancheros.

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("Buckskin Sam,")

AUTHOR OF "GOLD BUTTONS," "PRINCE OF PAN-OUT," "MUSTANG MONARCH," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE RANCHES ON THE SAN MARCOS.

THIRTY years ago Western Texas was but sparsely settled, and the dangers to be apprehended from raiding Mexicans and Indians forced men to locate lands in the vicinity of towns, small settlements, and Government posts.

The Guadalupe River, Salado Creek, and several smaller streams between San Antonio and Austin were, however, quite thickly settled, as red and yellow marauders committed depredations to the west and south of these cities, seldom passing between them. And on the San Marcos, some five miles below the town and springs of that name, there were three ranches, all on the south side of the stream; the dwell-

WITH A YELL OF MORTAL TERROR, HANK HOWARD FELL SENSELESS
UPON THE VERANDA!

ings being on the border of the bottom-timber, and the cattle-ranges back from the same, on the rolling prairie.

The ranch nearest San Marcos was owned by one Henry Howard, a widower, who had one child. This was a son, named Hancock, but familiarly known as Hank—a wild and reckless young man, who was not only addicted to drink, but was an inveterate gambler. He was the source of a great deal of trouble and anxiety to his father, who was an honest and most exemplary man, and of a proud old Kentucky family.

The ranch adjoining that of Howard was owned by a man named William Morgan, from Louisiana, and whose family consisted of a wife and son. The latter, whose name was Manly, was loved and honored by all who knew him—a handsome fellow, faithful, honest and true-hearted as the day was long—the very antipodes of his youthful neighbor.

Except in stature, strength and agility, the two young men were thoroughly opposites, for Hank Howard was of a swarthy complexion, with black hair and eyes, while Manly Morgan was blue-eyed and fair, and had long and wavy light brown hair.

To the east of the Morgan Ranch, and adjoining the same, was the "locate" of a man who had emigrated from Virginia more for his health than for aught else, for he was in the last stages of consumption. This was Morris Moore. He was a widower, and he, too, had but one child. But, in his case, this was of the opposite sex—a girl, Marion by name, and a most lovable maiden she was.

Marion Moore was but fifteen years of age when first brought to our notice, but she had all the appearance of a fully-developed woman. She was golden-haired, with a very fair skin, and was of medium height. Naturally she was of a sprightly and joyous disposition, but anxiety on account of her only remaining parent, and the consciousness that he would not long be spared to her, had lent a softened sadness to her face, which heightened its angelic expression.

The three settlers, who had thus located near each other, had been, on arriving in Texas some years previous, about equally well off in this world's goods, but the dissipation and general rascality of young Howard had depleted the wealth of his father, compelling the old gentleman to mortgage his ranch and cattle to save his son from being imprisoned for fraud and forgery. Hank had participated in more than one disreputable shooting scrape, from which he had gained a bad character in the adjoining towns.

He was a frequent visitor in San Antonio, was well known in the gaming establishments of the Alamo City, and was considered "crooked."

Yet, but little was known of the worst of his doings by his neighbors on the San Marcos; for he made it a point to go as straight as his nature would allow him when at home, and, on his father's account, many evil reports were silenced in place of being circulated.

The three homes were all within a short ride of San Marcos, which was, however, but a small village, having a store at which everything needed could be purchased, the proprietor acting also as postmaster. Living so near each other in that comparatively isolated region, and in a new country, it was natural for the three families to become very intimate. And such they were.

It was also very natural, as Marion Moore was the most beautiful and cultured maiden in that section of the country, that both Hancock Howard and Manly Morgan should love the very ground she pressed with her shapely little feet. This was true to the very letter, although it was something which she seldom did. Marion was passionately fond of equestrian exercise, and had a beautiful pony, on which she took frequent but short gallops up and down stream, and over the south plains—the feeble health of her father preventing a long absence on the part of the fair girl, who was assiduous in her attentions at all times, anticipating his every want—no trivial task, for Morris Moore was a somewhat exacting invalid.

Each of the rancheros owned slaves, but there were many duties in connection with running the ranches which the negroes could not attend to, and which Morris Moore, in his enfeebled condition, could not perform. In consequence of this, both Hank and Manly strove in every way to assist the father of the beautiful Marion; but Manly was not only twice as frequent in his visits to the Morris Ranch, but ten times more welcome.

Indeed, Hank was distrusted by both the father and daughter, although they endeavored to hide their aversion, in order to keep peace between the families, and for the sake of the young man's father, whom they greatly respected.

It will be seen, therefore, that there was a good opening for jealousy between the two young men; Hank Howard having good grounds for entertaining the green-eyed monster.

As much as he was capable of doing so, did Hank love Marion; but this did not extend to the

curtailing of his pleasures. He was overbearing in his demeanor, and inflated with vanity, and really could not, for some time, bring himself to believe that Marion Moore would for a moment hesitate between himself and the milk-sop he affected to consider his rival. Nor, indeed, did she.

The time was soon to come when Hank would be forced to the conclusion that he was not of so much consequence in the eyes of the beautiful Marion as he had for a long time, believed; indeed, he was to be humiliated and infuriated to such a degree as to bring all his evil passions to the front, and show his true character in all its devilish details.

Neither of the two lovers had ever, in words, told to the object of their affection "the old, old story;" but long had Marion Moore known, by glance of eye and flush of face, that the heart of Manly Morgan beat for her, and her alone. As for the young man himself his very life and soul were bound up in his love for the maiden; but, so unaccustomed had he been to female society, and unable to read the heart by signs, was he, that he was perpetually haunted by doubts and jealous fears. The thought that the more dashing and polished Hancock Howard had a better chance to win the prize than himself caused him no little uneasiness, and he formed a desperate resolve to decide his fate one way or the other.

Hank, too, was at length compelled, from reports that reached him, to feel less confident of winning Marion than he had been; he, also, decided to end all suspense on the subject. He knew that, should she reject him, a black gulf yawned henceforth before him—he would become ten times worse than he had ever been did she refuse to smile upon him; and a hundred times more lawless and desperate, did she betray a preference for Manly Morgan.

Thus were affairs at the three ranches when our story opens—Morris Moore becoming weaker and less fit for exertion each day, which caused both young men to offer themselves as loving guides and guards for life for the invalid's daughter—so soon, it was but too evident, to be left without a protector, and in a strange and wild region, so far away from her childhood's home.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

It was a bright morning in May. Marion Moore, seeing her father apparently much stronger, ordered her pony, and mounting, rode into the moss-draped bottom-timber to enjoy the pure, cool air and the songs of the birds.

The forest was luxuriant, many flowering bushes and vines relieving the somber shades, which became more weird and gloomy as she approached the river; the swaying, pall-like moss which hung from the branches grew longer and more dense, and the music of the birds died out as the little warblers flew further and further from the sunlight. And this impressive silence was in consonance with the feelings of the maiden; for her eyes were downcast, and her thoughts evidently not of the most pleasant nature. It was of her father she was thinking.

Although Morris Moore had asserted that he was much better, his daughter could not help perceiving that the hectic flush upon his sunken cheeks—the brand of the fatal disease—was much larger and deeper in color than ever before.

She had not wanted to leave his side, but feared to excite him by refusing to take the outdoor exercise he had insisted she should enjoy.

Marion had at first intended to gallop over the plain, beneath the bright golden morning sunlight; but the thought had struck her that a ride among the shadows of the timber would be more in keeping with her thoughts. At every space along the path where a natural "open" allowed, her pony would toss its head as if to attract the notice of its fair mistress; but Marion curbed the animal, without either speaking a word or patting its neck, as was her wont. Upon reaching a point near the river-bank, she turned up a path which led parallel to the stream, and then up the same toward the ranch of the Morgans.

All this time she did not permit her horse to go faster than a trot, and remained preoccupied in thought. A beautiful picture she and her pony formed, framed in as they were by such somber surroundings.

And that fair sight in Nature's wilds was destined to be seen and admired by the one who best deserved such a welcome sight. This was Manly Morgan. But, it was only for one brief moment, for there was to be a change of scene, most startling and harrowing to them both.

Strange to state, but nevertheless true, both Manly Morgan and Hancock Howard had equipped their horses at nearly the same time at which Marion Moore had set out, and both with the same object in view. Each had decided to make an effort to meet the idol of his dreams, and to offer her his hand and heart.

Of course neither of them was aware of the intentions or whereabouts of the other.

Neither did Manly, who would, from the fact that he had a shorter distance to ride, meet Marion first—neither did he know of the presence

of the pride of his heart in the timber amid which he had decided to journey. Never before had the fair girl ventured through the shades without looking out sharply on either side for bears and panthers, which at times roamed up the river from the less settled sections of the San Marcos.

Apparently she gave no thought of danger to herself, riding on listlessly and pensively; while Manly Morgan rode just as slowly in the same direction, seeming nearly as absent-minded as herself.

Nearer and nearer the pair approached each other, each unconscious of the other's presence; for the soft, moist bottom soil gave out no sound of hoofs.

And, dreaming not of danger, or of the presence of any human being or brute in her vicinity, Marion Moore, keeping her pony in check—which annoyed the animal to such an extent that it probably did not scent danger as quickly as it would otherwise have done—ambled on along the path, on one side of which was the dense undergrowth, within which, tearing with tooth and claw and devouring a pig in ravenous hunger, was a huge black bear.

And not until nearly abreast of the savage beast, were the maiden and the animal upon which she sat aware of their peril. Then the bear, enraged at being intruded upon in its feast, gave out a blood-calling roar, and sprung crashing through the undergrowth, directly in front of the terror-stricken maiden and her pony!

The latter was incapable of movement.

The poor girl, too, was appalled, and for a time unable to move a muscle or utter a shriek.

Then upward, upon his haunches, with a fierce, deep growl, the bear reared itself, its fore-paws extended, the claws working in and out their hairy sockets nervously. The pony, with a frenzied snort, also reared upward and strove to whirl half about to make rapid flight; but the rigid hands and arms of the poor girl held tight reins, thus impeding the escape of the horse. But suddenly Marion regained control of her senses, and uttering a piercing cry, she instinctively clutched the limb of a tree over her head, just as the fierce brute made a terrific blow at the pony with one of its huge paws.

The poor little animal, with a shriek that was almost human in expression, darted away, down the path by which it had come, leaving Marion clinging to the limb, directly over the enraged bear.

Was ever maiden in a more perilous predicament?

She drew herself upward, and wound her arms around the rough branch, which bruised her delicate flesh—her robe and feet being, as she well knew, within reach of the terrible paws of the mammoth bear.

Her eyes were filled with unutterable horror.

She uttered an agonized prayer for help.

And scarcely had the petition been breathed when it was answered; for Manly Morgan had caught a glimpse of her before the savage beast had manifested its presence, and had, from the mingled joy and surprise which the sight produced, halted to think of the words he should use in declaring his love, which he had determined must then be spoken. From his position he would be obliged to pass around a series of dense thickets by the winding path, before he could gain another view of Marion; she having also passed behind a long line of undergrowth.

Consequently, the confusion of Manly, caused by the unexpected appearance of Marion was responsible for the brief halt which nearly prevented him from passing over the intervening space in time to be of service. Soon he knew of the danger which threatened his heart's idol.

The roar of the bear, and the shriek of the poor girl, told but too plainly the awful peril that had overtaken her; and, with an outcry of the utmost concern and apprehension, the young man spurred forward, at the same time jerking his revolver. The next moment he was nearly paralyzed with horror when he beheld his darling clinging to the limb, and saw beneath her the fearful cause. He had known that the roar proceeded from a bear, but had no idea it could be such a monster as that before him.

Who can picture the agony of soul suffered by Manly Morgan at such a moment, when every instant must have seemed an age?

On he crashed through the undergrowth, toward the dread scene, until he could detect the trembling of the maiden—his more than life—and imagined she was slipping from the limb, and falling into that awful embrace.

It was soon something more than imagination, however. The fierce brute had now gained, for him, a more favorable position. All this was in a minute's time. Then the noise made by Manly's horse was heard by the savage beast, and, with an angry roar, it made a quick clutch at the skirts of poor Marion, the terrible claws catching and tearing into the strong cloth!

The wretched girl gave a cry of horror.

She felt herself being dragged downward!

With his heart ready to burst he yelled:

"Hold fast for a moment! I come to save you, Marion. It is I, Manly Morgan!"

He scarce knew what he said. His gaze was fixed upon the terrible jaws of the bear, and though he had his revolver in his hand, he dared not shoot, as he knew even the smallest twig would turn a bullet from its true course.

Like a projectile from a catapult, man and horse shot into the clear space; the latter landing heavily, and halting an instant before reaching the bear it so feared. Manly had expected this. He took advantage of it, quickly kicking his feet free from the stirrups. He then bounded clear over his horse's head, and directly upon the bear, severing, with one slash of his bowie, the skirt of Marion Moore from the claws and teeth of the big brute.

The wonder was that the poor maiden had maintained her frenzied clutch upon the limb.

She had become faint and hopeless the moment she had felt the bear seize her clothing, but she heard the words of Manly Morgan—heard the crashing of the lover's horse—and the knowledge that help was near gave her renewed strength. Then she tightened her desperate hold.

A moment more, and she felt that relief had come, but that Manly was in great peril. Yet she could not, for her life, move a muscle, as she beheld the dread scene below her. Her arms seemed locked around the limbs, her muscles rigid, and her nerves paralyzed. She could not even cry out. Her breath seemed to stop.

It was awful. If the infuriated beast should slay Manly, then it would tear her limb from limb!

Death would be welcome in such an event, but not in such a dread and horrible form.

Thus thought poor Marion Moore.

With a fierce growl of rage, the baffled beast turned upon its assailant, and sought to infold him in its powerful fore-paws; but, the young man grasped the neck of the monster with his left arm, and with his right plunged his bowie blade deep into the side of the huge brute, whose roars of pain and fury sounded loud through the natural arches of the bottom-timber.

Then, both man and beast rolled over and over upon the ground in fierce conflict for the mastery.

Manly's revolver was knocked from his grasp, but the weapon had been of no use to him, and, in such quick and violent contortions, would not have been had he retained it. His clothing was torn by the fearful claws, and his flesh as well; but the terrible bowie, reeking with gore, was buried to the hilt again and again in the roaring, maddened, and most furious beast. The blood spurted on all sides, bespattering the foliage, grass and flowers of the open.

The horse of young Morgan had retreated but a few paces; the well-trained animal, although greatly terrified, refraining from running away, although it might have done so without passing the bear. But the conflict was almost ended.

Weaker and weaker grew the bear, as did also the brave young ranchero, about whose body in the latter part of the struggle one fore-paw of the beast was wound in a pressing grip, born of rage and agony, and which nearly crushed in the ribs. As the brute writhed in death, the young man cast a feeble glance upward, his gaze meeting that of poor Marion. The deepest horror was expressed in her blue orbs, betraying to him more than words could tell, that she whom he had rescued from death was his as long as life lasted.

The angelic form and face upon the limb of the tree became less and less plain to her defender. At last, to his fading vision, all was blank. He had fainted in the death embrace of the monster he had slain!

Marion Moore detected the fading light in his eyes, and her great fear was that he had been stricken with death. Her limbs relaxed, as she gave utterance to a low moan of anguish, and she fell limp to the earth. There she lay, apparently as devoid of life as the vivid and gore-stained mammoth bear, which had so nearly been her death. There, too, lay Manly Morgan—the past and present alike a blank.

The youthful and handsome pair, and the carcass of the savage beast, all apparently dead, formed, in that so late beautiful, but now blood-stained glen, a most startling and impressive picture. Overhead, all was draped with thousands of festoons of "old man's beard"—fitting decorations of death!

And upon this picture gazed the faithful horse of Manly Morgan, its ears pricked forward, and its muzzle extended, scenting the blood-stained air; while its great protruding eyes were filled with mingled wonder and fright. Nor was the startled steed the sole spectator of that silent tableau in the "open." One there was, besides, who gazed upon it, and with feelings decidedly mixed in their character.

CHAPTER III.

A DESPERATE RESOLVE.

HANCOCK HOWARD, although he, too, had chosen to proceed down the paths of the bottom-

timber at a reckless speed, as was his custom, was forced to bend low in his saddle at times to avoid striking the limbs of trees, or ride with one leg or the other over the horn of his saddle, to prevent his being torn by the undergrowth.

In consequence of this, he was not far in the rear of Manly Morgan: for, as has been stated, the latter had been riding at a moderate gait. Thus it happened that the villain, when on his way to tell his love to Marion Moore—as was also his rival—heard, although but faintly, the shriek of the fair girl, when, after her dazed state had been superseded by a correct realization of her great danger, she had given vent to her alarm.

Hank jerked his horse to haunches at once.

He could not, for the life of him, understand the sound; but he knew it proceeded from some one in real or fancied peril, and at a point down the river, in the direction of the Morris Ranch.

Upon deliberation, he half believed that it had come from female lips, although the distance and timber had caused it to sound strangely. It appeared, however, to be lacking in the depth and coarseness which would naturally characterize the outcry of a man.

Again, the direction from which it came was favorable to the supposition that the cry had been given by Marion Moore. He knew that she was in the habit of riding within the bottom-timber. Indeed, he had hoped, that very morning, to meet her in the shades; which would be a favorable place to declare the passion which he called his love.

No sooner did Hank come to this conclusion, than he braced himself by a drink from his brandy-flask, drove spurs, and hastened on at a more rapid rate than previously.

Soon, however, he again halted, for the shriek once more shot through the timber; this time plainer, and more piercing, and evidently expressing both fear and horror. No longer was Hank in doubt as to its origin.

He knew that it proceeded from the lips, not only of a female, but of a young maiden; and that she was in deadly peril, or believed herself to be so. And, as there was no other young lady in that section, he reasoned that Miss Moore, while riding in the bottom-timber, had met with something which greatly terrified her. And, while his horse was motionless, though it was for a moment only, Hank heard the roar of the bear, and other sounds which hinted at a conflict. Instantly he drove spurs, and dashed headlong down the path whence the sounds had proceeded. He felt that he was fortunate.

Hank was positive that his ride had been at a most propitious time—that he would undoubtedly be able, by arriving opportunely upon the scene, to act the daring rescuer of the fair Marion, and thus place her under the deepest obligations to him.

Consequently the young man was greatly excited and jubilant; this fact proving that his love—or that which he so termed—could not be very strong or deep, or he would have felt the most torturing concern in regard to the safety of the maiden. The true state of the case, however, was that he did not believe her to be in any real danger. His idea was, that women made a great fuss even when there is little or no cause for alarm.

The bear might be "tred," and still terribly frighten a young girl at a distance.

Hank was soon to know all the facts of the case, for he came near the scene at the closing of the struggle between Manly and the bear. The first object that met his view was Marion Moore, clinging to the bough of the tree. This caused the young man to drive spurs deeper; but, the next instant, with a terrible oath, he jerked his horse to haunches and sprung to the earth, that he might not be observed by the suffering maiden.

A nearer advance had enabled him to see beyond the bushes the struggling forms of Manly Morgan and the monster. Like a flash the thought came to him that, not only had he arrived too late, but that Morgan, his detested rival, had either been with Marion, or had reached the spot in time to save her from the claws and teeth of the beast.

The latter supposition seemed the more probable of the two; for she would not have given vent to such extreme horror and affright, by her shrieks, had Manly been with her.

The intense fury, vengeful hatred, jealousy, and disappointment that this scene created in the breast of Hank Howard, almost drove him wild. He bit his lips until the blood oozed from the same, and clinched his hands until his finger-nails pierced their palms; for he realized at once, that what he now beheld spoke, plainly and unmistakably, defeat to the one main and ruling object of his life—namely, the winning of Marion Moore.

He knew that almost any young girl, after having been thus saved by a young and handsome man, who would be henceforth a hero in her eyes, would naturally fall in love with her rescuer. Such was the nature of the fair sex. And as Manly and Marion had for a long time been on intimate terms of friendship, this seemed the more probable.

If she had not loved him before, which was questionable, she would most certainly do so

now, after his having thus proved his devotion to her. Hank had no doubt of this.

These thoughts were far from being pleasant ones. They rendered him murderously furious.

Murderously, did we say? Yes, for at once he felt convinced that he could only hope for the hand of Marion Moore, when Manly Morgan had ceased to exist. Ay, from that very moment, murderous thoughts were born in the fiendish brain of the dastardly miscreant, Hank Howard!

He witnessed the last struggles of the giant beast, saw the face of Manly turned toward the fair girl when the former was yet in the death-clutch of the hairy monster, and then knew that his rival had either fainted, or was dead. Ferently the wretch hoped the latter—hoped that his vitals had been torn to the very heart.

Then he beheld Marion fall from the limb, and knew that she had swooned. She had been so near to her preserver, that she might have known his last glance at her was the last he should give on earth; and this had caused her to faint and fall. This might be so, or it might only have been from the overtaxing of her nerves—the effect of the fearful dangers she had passed.

Hank would have given much to know the true cause—much to know if Manly Morgan was dead, or only insensible. If the latter, was not this a most favorable opportunity to get rid of his rival, and that without any suspicions being cast upon himself, as to his having been the cause of the young man's death?

Could he not, if Manly was unconscious, steal up and force the bowie-blade into his breast—the knife still in the hand of its owner—and thus have it seem to those who should discover the corpse, that the steel had been driven into his heart when struggling with the bear?

Even Marion, who had witnessed the conflict, would not have the slightest doubt as to this having been the manner of her rescuer's death.

It was a most devilishly conceived plan, but it was a plausible one, and easy to carry out; for the maiden would doubtless remain insensible for some time. It could be done, and Hank Howard would do it. He knew, moreover, that if he was to make the attempt, he must do so at once. There might have been others in the bottom-timber who had heard the cries of Marion, and they might at that very moment be approaching.

This caused Hank to peer around in every direction, and to listen most intently; but he saw nothing, heard nothing, to indicate the presence of others in the vicinity. Already was he guilty of murder, in thought and purpose; and the dastard trembled, gazed suspiciously upward into the moss-draped branches, as if there might be some one there who could read the thoughts and intentions of his villainous heart.

Then he stood erect, and shook his clinched fists in the air, toward the unconscious form of Manly Morgan, his teeth grinding together, his thin lips curling back from them.

Striding to the side of his horse, he led the animal quickly into a dense thicket, secured it to a bush, and then swallowed a long draught from his brandy-flask. His movements were now quick and unhesitating.

He had decided to make the attempt to remove his rival from his path, did he find him with life in his breast. There was murder in the heart, and flashing from the black eyes of Hank Howard, as he stole toward the clear space within which lay his intended victim, his intended wife, and the carcass of the bear.

Cautiously he crept forward to the prostrate and senseless form of Marion. He could detect no sign of returning consciousness. There she lay, more beautiful, it seemed to him, than ever.

Where was the man, Hank asked himself, who would not commit any crime, however black and hellish, to win such a prize?

Yet, would the fates allow his cause to prosper, after such a fiendish deed?

Hank was superstitious, and the scene, together with the somber and impressive surroundings, caused him to feel strange and unnatural. But he forced back these impressions, knowing that the one grand opportunity to rid himself of a rival whom he detested, for the very reason that he had ever known Manly to be a far better man in every way than himself, was fast passing—if he acted at all in the matter, it must be at once.

Only a few moments had passed since young Morgan had lost consciousness, and Marion had fallen in a swoon from the limb of the tree.

Quickly the miscreant glided up to the side of the prostrate man, and placed his hand over his heart; at the same time scanning his form, to ascertain if he had received any serious wounds. There were none visible, that would produce death; and, besides, there was a beating, although faint, of the heart. Manly had but fainted from over-exertion, anxiety for the safety of Marion, and from loss of blood.

Thus Hank Howard instantly decided, and he resolved to murder his rival. He had become more furiously vengeful each moment, and there was no longer the slightest hesitation. He raised himself erect, and, after a glance at

Marion, who remained as if dead, and having given one sweeping glance around upon the thickets—his very manner and expression proving his murderous intent—he resumed his stooping posture, and felt for the knife of his intended victim, which was still clutched; the steel, however, being buried in the side of the bear.

Deftly, but cautiously did Hank draw out the knife, by clasping his fingers about those of Manly Morgan, to keep the grip of the latter still about the buckhorn. This accomplished, the villain, keeping a keen watch upon the face of the senseless man, turned the blood-stained bowie, placing the point of the blade against the left side of the seemingly doomed man. The very fires of Tophet were now gleaming in the eyes of Hank Howard.

By pressing the form of Manly over slightly to the left the dastard knew that his victim would fall, a dead weight, directly upon the blade; forcing the steel through clothing and breast, into the very heart. And, as he performed this in a very expeditious manner, he intended at the same time, to roll the carcass of the bear partly upon his victim, and then bound into the bushes; for ten to one, he reasoned, the piercing of the breast would cause the young man to recover, although it seemed, as though it was physically impossible for him to extricate himself, and more especially as he would be stricken instantly by the hand of death.

He would make sure work, but he must, at the same time, make sure that he was not seen and recognized. He well knew how much there was at stake.

But Hancock Howard was destined to dash into the thicket sooner than he thought, even before he could accomplish his murderous purpose, for just as he was about to hurl the senseless form of young Morgan upon the cruel steel—he bracing himself for the cowardly deed—his hair was caused to stand on end, his swarthy face to become ashen in hue, and he to bound headlong into the undergrowth, as though a legion of fiends were in close pursuit of him.

What was it that caused the murder-bent miscreant thus to act, and in this way prevent the hellish deed he contemplated?

It was naught else but the voice of a human being—the last sound that Hank dreamed of hearing or wished to hear.

The voice was that of an aged negro, and the words were spoken in a manner and with an intonation that clearly meant business. What he said was this:

"Hol' on dar, Mars' Hank Howard! Doan' yer go no furder, I tell yer! Doan' yer dast harm my young Mars' Manly, er ole Uncle Mose'll shoot. Dat he will, fer a fac', ef dey hangs him fer it!"

"What yer doin' hyer, anyway, Mars' Hank? Hol' on, I done tol' yer, man, fer I's done drawed bead on yer! Thar, I g'un yer fa' warnin'!"

CHAPTER IV. WHO DID THE DEED?

HANK HOWARD had thought it possible there might have been some one else in the timber who had heard the cries of Marion; yet, after listening for some time, he had been convinced to the contrary. He was wrong, however.

Old Mose, an aged and much favored slave of the Morgan family, had that very morning, fortunately for his young master—but, as the sequel will show, unfortunately for himself—been given permission to go to the river and fish.

As Uncle Mose had the same liking for "possum-meat" as the generality of his race, he had taken an old rifle along, hoping to discover some of his favorite game, even in the daytime.

He had heard the shrieks of Marion Moore, but, being slightly deaf, they seemed to come from a much greater distance. The only effect the sounds had upon him was to awaken his superstitious fears, causing him to use great caution in his investigations. The gloom and weird aspect of the bottom-timber, which has been described, made the old darky think that perhaps it was dark enough for ghosts to ramble with some degree of comfort. But in spite of his alarm, old Mose proceeded cautiously along, and happened, more by accident than any skill or calculation, to strike the exact "locate," and, most providentially, at the very time when his presence was most needed.

He stood in great dread of bears, and would have been of no assistance to his young master, had he arrived at an earlier moment. As it happened, Mose reached a point from which he could peer through the bushes into the clear space where lay the dead monster, and the unconscious pair of lovers, just as Hank Howard stole from the thicket within which he had secured his horse. The old negro was suspicious.

It would have been perfectly natural for him to have at once made known his presence, and sought to assist Hank in restoring the two unconscious ones, or to be of service if they were dead.

But old Mose had no love for Hank Howard. It was but a little time before that he had been struck a cruel blow with a loaded riding-whip by the young man, because he did not get out of

the way fast enough to suit him. It had felled him to the earth, where he lay for a long time insensible; but Mose had not spoken of this outrage to his fellow-slaves, nor complained to his master, lest it might cause trouble between the two families. He had previously distrusted and feared young Howard; but, since he had been struck by him, his feeling was one of mortal terror. The old slave believed that Hank would kill him, or any other negro, with as little compunction as he would a dog.

Consequently, it was not strange that Mose remained quiet, giving no sign of his presence.

He detected at once, from the movements and manner of Hank Howard, that the latter was not intending to aid the senseless pair in any way. This was soon very evident.

Uncle Mose comprehended the situation of affairs. It was plain to him that his young master had rescued Miss Marion from the bear, perhaps losing his own life; and that, possibly, the young lady had died from fright, as he felt he would have done himself had he been in her place.

The cautious movements of Hank, after the miscreant had bent for a moment over Miss Moore, satisfied Mose that the maiden had but just fainted, and that young Howard was fearful she would recover. It was also clear to the old man that his young master was still alive: for Hank continued to be cautious and stealthy, after examining his prostrate rival. Why the villain should thus act was at first a great mystery to old Mose, puzzling him very much until he recalled the fact that it was common report that both the young gentlemen were in love with Miss Moore.

Even then, it did not seem possible that Hank Howard would dare harm his young master—at least, not to Uncle Mose.

Thoughts flew rapidly through the aged slave's brain, as he watched keenly every move of the wily miscreant. It seemed certain that Hank's object could not be a good one, else why did he move so stealthily, and listen so intently.

He must have in view the commission of a crime.

He had paid but slight attention to the young lady, which, under the circumstances, was passing strange, for report said he had sworn by all the fiends she should be his wife. This was when he had been drunk, and within hearing of his slaves. But here was a strong motive, argued Mose, for getting rid of Manly; for every negro knew, or thought he knew, the state of affairs between him and Miss Marion.

The old darky was no longer in doubt as to the intentions of Hank Howard. If Manly Morgan was alive, he was none the less doomed.

All was plain. Mose became furious, in his just indignation, and his hatred for the dastard who meditated such a cowardly murder. He feared Hank, but his love for his young master forced that fear back; and he cocked his rifle, took aim, and yelled as recorded.

As we have seen, the villain fled. But, no sooner had he disappeared in the thicket than old Mose trembled in terror. All his courage had vanished, even as his last words had been uttered. The poor old slave clearly saw that he had doomed himself to death!

It was horrible, the thought of being murdered in cold blood by Hank Howard, as he knew he would be, sooner or later. Hank would, when his fright was over, know who it had been that had interfered with his plans, preventing him from killing Manly Morgan.

He would know that his dread secret was now known to a negro, who was apt to betray him at any moment; and, although the slave's testimony was good for nothing in a court of justice, yet everybody would believe him, for old Mose had never been known to lie. The latter knew that he was in possession of a secret that would occasion his death; indeed, he felt that he was not safe a moment, there in the bottom-timber, and he resolved to flee homeward, and say nothing of what he had witnessed.

But then, he reflected, Hank would endeavor to cut him off, and prevent his returning home.

The poor old slave trembled. His face became ashen, and his eyes began to roam suspiciously, as he crawled upon hands and knees from thicket to thicket, muttering prayers as he went.

Cunning as an Indian was old Mose, for he proceeded by a circuitous route toward the river, and along its bank thus hoping to avoid discovery by Hank. But this very course betrayed him, for turtles and frogs kept plunging into the river as he crawled along; and the keen ear of the man he wished to avoid caught the sounds, which he heeded not.

No man was ever struck with greater consternation and guilty terror, than was Hank Howard when the words of old Mose had fallen so unexpectedly upon his ear in the almost death-like stillness. He had been positive that not a soul was near, and that there was nothing to prevent the consummation of his foul purpose. Then had come the warning, and, coward-like he had fled.

Soon, however, the wretch halted, gasping for breath, and his whole form trembling violently.

If Marion had recovered sufficiently to have witnessed his dastardly attempt on the life of

Manly, he was lost; for all hope of winning her would be at an end. He recalled the words that had been spoken, and remembered that the negro had called him by name. He knew, too, who it had been. It was Uncle Mose, a privileged slave of the Morgans.

There was little comfort in that knowledge, for Hank recollects having struck the old man a severe and uncalled-for blow, which, of course, the recipient had not forgotten. He had not the slightest doubt that Mose would at once reveal all that he had seen, and that his story would be believed; indeed, his trail in the soft bottom-land would prove the words of the old negro to be so far true.

The well known rivalry between himself and Manly would be accepted as sufficient motive, when the facts, as represented by the old slave, became known, for the deed.

Besides this, Hank Howard knew that he had, more than once, made reckless threats, when under the influence of liquor, all of which would go to prove his object in attempting the life of Manly Morgan. And the manner in which he had made that attempt would cause even his most depraved associates to turn their backs upon him in loathing. Ruin stared him in the face.

Such thoughts were maddening. He actually foamed at the mouth. This inaction, however, was of but short duration. He dared not return to the scene from which he had so lately fled, for it was probable that one or the other of the senseless pair had by this time recovered.

That would be, he felt, just his luck!

The game was dead against him, and there was no hope in the future if old Mose should reach the Morgan Ranch alive.

But that he must never do!

Hank made a *detour*, to head the fleeing darky off; and this was easily accomplished, for the villain was agile, and swift of foot.

He soon reached a point favorable for the hellish deed he contemplated. It was a gully, that led from some distance inland to the river.

Here, the dastard crouched, with ready blade.

Mose, in his hurry and terror, and not looking before him, tumbled into this. Had he sprung down, and landed on his feet, the blade of his enemy would have been plunged into his breast. Hank uttered a fearful oath, and the terrified slave, hearing this, knew that his time had come. It was pitiful.

The old negro struggled to his knees, and cried out to Heaven, in pleading prayer.

He prayed not for life, he addressed not a word to the wretch who stood over him; and this proved that he knew all, that he felt no mercy would be extended to him. He was right.

As Uncle Mose's last petition was breathed, the bowie blade of Hank Howard, the dastard, was thrust to the hilt in that faithful black breast; and, with a groan that should have rung in the ears of his murderer as long as life lasted, the old slave sunk forward, dead!

The next moment there was a loud splash and spatter, as old Mose was hurled into the San Marcos, disappearing in its depths.

This was one step in advance, Hank Howard thought—rather, one backward, and a fearful one, in the path he was treading.

It was concealment, it was true, but for how long?

Like a fiend from the bottomless pit, Hank gazed into the gloomy waters; his knife stained with human blood, and his soul with a most dastardly murder!

CHAPTER V.

UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER.

IT was not long after Hank Howard had bounded, in terror, from the side of Manly Morgan, that Marion Moore recovered consciousness. Soon, upon her bewildered brain, flashed the near past, and she sprung up; catching, as she did, the first sight of the bear's carcass, and the still form of Manly Morgan.

Her face was pale, and she panted for breath.

"He cannot be dead!" she cried. "Oh, I shall die, if he has met his death in defense of me!"

She struggled to her feet, and gazed around.

What an impressive scene it was! No wonder was it that the poor girl was deeply affected. With a groan, she broke the awful spell that bound her. It was torture, terrible torture, to remain thus. She sank upon her knees, by the side of that still form.

All maiden reserve was put aside by the joyous discovery that he was not dead.

Ere long, the lids of the young man's eyes were raised, and, at once, he seemed to gain control of his senses. The maiden was startled at the sudden recovery; so much so, that she was powerless to rise to her feet, and the young man could read all the more than sympathy in her eyes and expression. With a glad cry, he caught her to his breast.

Then and there each knew that the love and life of the other was theirs until the end, without the slightest breath of doubt to mar their supreme happiness. It was an ecstatic moment to both.

"Thank God, you are safe!" were Manly's first words. "And I thank Him, too, that you

love me. Speak to me, Marion, and tell me it is not a dream, but reality."

"You have saved my life, Manly," she said, "and that life is yours. I have long felt so, but now I feel it would not be worth living were it not shared with you. Yes, I am yours."

Then came thoughts less selfish to her mind.

"Oh, my poor father! what will be think of my long absence, and he so ill?"

"Did you come direct from the ranch here?"

"Yes, Manly. Father seemed so much better, and be insisted upon my taking a ride. Why I came into the timber I hardly know, for I had intended to gallop over the plain."

The maiden paused, and shuddered as her eyes lighted upon the carcass of the bear.

"It has been an eventful morning, Marion," said Manly. "I left home with the determination to end my suspense, and when I discovered you from a distance, I thought that the woodland nymphs must have planned to draw us together in these solitudes. I had halted to compose myself, and the next moment you had disappeared. Then came your shriek, which was followed by the roar of the bear."

"But how came you to clutch the limb? Why did you not cling to your saddle?"

"I cannot tell. I was so frightened that I knew not what I did at the time."

Again the fair girl shuddered.

"It was fated to be so, Marion, darling. But if you came direct from the ranch, you have been absent but a short time, for I cannot believe I lay senseless very long. Did you draw my knife from the side of the bear? There it lies beside me, I see."

"It was in your hand when I came to you."

"That is strange. I could swear that I plunged it to the hilt in the bear's side. How could I have drawn the blade out when my senses forsook me? What does it mean, Marion?"

By this time both were on their feet, Manly supporting the maiden with one arm.

The young ranchero scanned the ground, and suddenly exclaimed, in great excitement:

"I declare there has been someone here while we were insensible. Look at those footprints, Marion. They were made by a man in high-heeled boots. There is some mystery here!"

The young girl became much alarmed.

Manly swept suspicious glances around, and then, with a cry of surprise, he said:

"Excuse me, Marion, for a moment. I see some fresh proofs not far distant."

Leaving the maiden, he sprung to the margin of the thicket, into which Hancock Howard had darted when balked in his criminal intent by poor old Mose. He quickly returned, holding in his hand a piece of blue cloth, to which was attached a peculiar brass button.

"Do you recognize this, Marion?" he asked.

"Yes; it must have been torn from Hank Howard's riding-jacket," was the reply.

"Just so. And he was the man who was here when we both lay senseless. Now, how do you account for his not having endeavored to aid us in any way?"

Marion could only look her astonishment.

"I cannot understand it," she said; "but I know he dislikes you, Manly, very much."

"Yes, and loves you, correspondingly."

Again the young girl shuddered, as she said:

"Please do not say such a thing again! I have positively a fear of him. I know it is foolish to entertain many of the fancies that I do, but I cannot banish them."

"I know, darling, that he is to be feared and dreaded; but he must keep off my trail, or he will regret it. Let him, by word or deed, cause you a single sorrow, and I'll crush him as I would a serpent."

"We must not borrow trouble," said the maiden; "but, Manly, for my sake, seek to avoid him. But, I am forgetting. I must return to my father. I hate myself for neglecting him, especially when I cannot help seeing that the time I have left, in which to love and honor him, is short."

"My poor Marion! But you must not mention this morning's adventure to him. It might have an injurious effect upon him."

"I shall tell him one thing that will relieve him, and that is, Manly, that you have asked me to be your wife. He will be rejoiced to know that he will not be leaving me alone and unprotected. I know how he feels."

"Very well, Marion. You shall ride my horse, and I will lead the animal as far as the border of the timber. Your pony may have stampeded home to the corral. Let us hope your father has not seen him."

"But you are weak, Manly, you cannot walk."

"I have a few scratches, but they are nothing, and will soon heal. Have no fears about me. Here is my noble steed. Any other horse would have run away in fright."

"There you are, Marion dear, and I'll see you home. To-morrow, I will call at the ranch. As it is, I need patching up, as old Uncle Mose would say, and your father would not be taken with my appearance."

The young girl was lifted into the saddle, and her escort started the horse onward toward Moore Ranch, walking by her side.

The cheeks of Marion had recovered their

bloom; indeed, they were flushed much deeper than usual, and there was a happiness expressed upon her face and in her eyes, that was ravishing in the extreme.

From pensive grieving she had that morning been transported into the most abject terror, and then had experienced the very extreme of concern in regard to her rescuer's safety, to be launched from this into a heaven of love and delight. Was she to be called upon—that maiden so angelic, so good and lovable—to suffer the extreme of torturing emotions? We shall see later on.

As it was, a moderate change was soon to come; for she was fated to ride home alone, as not a dozen strides had the horse she rode taken when both she and Manly caught the intonation of a loud outcry, like that of a tortured soul. It was a most terrific and frightful yell, that sounded from the river-bank, and not more than a couple of hundred yards distant.

"Ride fast for home, Marion, my darling!" urged young Morgan, after jerking the horse to a halt, and gazing for a moment all around in the utmost amazement. "Ride on, dear, and secure my horse on the margin of the timber. There is a mystery here. There was that in the evident presence of Hank Howard, when we were both unconscious, and his flight from the scene of the bear-fight for some cause unknown. He may be connected with that frightful yell."

"He is equal to any crime, but at all events I must investigate. Ride fast, I beg of you, darling. Good-luck, and away!"

The lips of the youthful pair met. Again was Marion's fair face pallid, and again she trembled, as she spoke in a strange voice, and one that was full of conflicting emotions:

"For my sake, Manly—remember, for my sake—do not rush into danger needlessly. Bear in mind that you are responsible for the happiness, ay, for the life of another—that you belong to me! Oh, what a fearful day this has been!"

"Away! If you love me, away!" returned the young ranchero. "Never fear, Marion, I shall remember all, especially to whom I belong from this out. May God bless and keep you, my darling!"

He turned away hurriedly, and soon was out of her sight. And the next moment Marion Moore was speeding south through the thick shades toward the margin of the timber, while Manly Morgan was stealing, Indian-like, toward the river, his trusty bowie in his hand.

CHAPTER VI. COWARD CONSCIENCE.

NOT until Howard had jerked free his bowie blade from the breast of poor old Mose, and hurled his victim into the waters of the Rio San Marcos, did he fully realize the magnitude of the crime he had committed. Then there was a revulsion of the miscreant's feelings and emotions.

The cowardice of his nature took full possession of him. Depraved as he was, he began to detest himself for having allowed his passion to get control of him to such an extent. He recalled the fact that Uncle Mose had, without doubt, never spoken of the cruel blow he had given him. Had he done so, Hank would certainly have heard of it.

The cowardly wretch was filled with self-contempt yet he could not bring his victim back to life. But, as he reasoned that it was impossible for any one to connect him with the taking off of the old negro, he became more relieved in mind.

All this time, he gazed, as if bound by a horrible fascination, down into the dark waters. The projecting roots from the bank upon which he stood seemed like so many serpents, squirming and writhing, and as if striving to get at him, their forked tongues darting toward him threateningly.

Surely it was time that the waters should have become settled, yet they continued to boil, and were violently agitated! Hank struck his forehead with his clinched fist, to dispel his imaginings.

He fancied, now and then, that he could see the head of the murdered man rising above the surface of the stream. The villain ground his teeth furiously together, and muttered a terrible oath. He would have fled from the spot, but was incapable of doing so; for his muscles seemed to have suddenly become rigid. Thus Hank Howard remained.

More and more the waters became agitated! Each moment seemed an age to the miscreant. What was it? Could it be mere fancy?

No! Beyond all doubt, there, below him, was the gray woolly head of the murdered Mose; his face upturned, and his eyes wide open!

Surely the soul must yet linger in the body, for straight into the eyes of his inhuman slayer were the orbs of Uncle Mose fixed!

Then, with evidently the last strength in his frame and senses, the dying man forced words from his trembling lips—words horrible to hear:

"Don't go no furder, Mars' Hank! Ole Mose done forgib yer, but don't go no furder!"

Then the arms of the floating man were thrust upward violently above the waters, the fingers

distended, and working convulsively. To Hank Howard, the sight was an awful one.

The dread spell that had bound him, suddenly broke. He dropped his blood-stained knife, and bounded madly, wildly, up the gully. Never was a man more terrified. At times he fell prostrate, for he paid not the least attention to the obstructions which lay in his path.

It so happened, that a curve of the gully approached quite near the spot at which Hank had left his horse secured. This, he at once recollected. But he dashed past his steed to the opposite side of the clump of bushes, peering forth, to see if Marion and Manly were still near the carcass of the bear, and still unconscious.

Both were gone. Hank heaved a sigh of relief, for, but a moment before, he had realized that the yell he had uttered must have betrayed the fact to any one within hearing, that some one must be in dire distress. There had been no danger, it appeared, for Manly Morgan and Marion Moore had recovered, and departed, as their absence, and the absence of the horse of Manly seemed to prove. Yet they might not have gone far. They might have heard him, and they might return.

This possibility nerved the young man to instant action.

He sprang into his saddle, and drove spurs.

To remain a moment longer was torture to him.

He spurred madly toward the same point to which Marion Moore was then riding upon the horse Manly Morgan. Had not the beast stumbled and slightly lamed itself, Marion would have bled, been free from the timber before Hank had passed half the distance through the same.

But it had been ordered otherwise.

Before the maiden had reached the lighter portion of the timber, she heard a crashing in the bushes and branches close behind her.

It was Hancock Howard, the assassin!

The young girl caught but one glance at the terrible rider whom she so much feared.

That glance was more than sufficient.

She urged her horse to a headlong gallop.

She felt positive, however, that Hank had not discovered her. He appeared to be fleeing from some one.

Marion quickly forced her horse into a dense thicket, and halted, hoping to avoid discovery. She trembled with fright, and could hardly avoid falling from her saddle. Thus, for a moment, she waited. Then, close up to the side of thicket within which she was concealed, dashed the miscreant; and, that instant, his horse became entangled in a vine, and stumbled. He retained his seat, however.

But there had been a moment's halt, which was sufficient to give Marion a view of the dastard from between the twigs and foliage.

She then saw that his clothing was torn, and stained with blood. She thought of the footprints, and the piece of cloth which Manly had picked up.

Could he and Hank have met since then?

No sooner did this possibility come into the mind of Marion Moore than she uttered a piercing cry, which was echoed by a yell of terror from Hank, who bounded through the thick undergrowth, and disappeared from her view.

For a time, the poor maiden seemed incapable of anything like rational thought.

She made no attempt to resume her way, or to return and ascertain if her suspicions were true, for she was, as it were, paralyzed by the startling occurrences, and the dreadful possibilities that might have been since she had parted with her betrothed. There was a sickening dread tearing at her heart, caused by the fear that Manly had been torn out of her love and life by Hank Howard, whose features, as she had just beheld them, mirrored, as she believed, some dark and bloody deed. His very manner and actions indicated that he was fleeing in guilty terror from the scene of a crime that had been committed by himself.

And he, the murderer—what of him?

Filled with dread and superstitious horror as he had been when passing the thicket in which Marion Moore was concealed, it was little wonder that his terror had been greatly increased by the piercing shriek which he then heard; for he was so demoralized that he was incapable of reasoning. Indeed, his mind was so filled with thoughts of his crime, and the fearful appearance of his victim, as old Mose reappeared above the waters, and whispering as from the other world such dread words—all this, and the fright of pursuing spirits—his imagination so ran riot that there was little or no room for reasonable thought or action.

And much of his demoralization was due to his not having taken his usual stimulant, brandy, for some time. Indeed, there had not been time for him to do so, or even to think of it.

But as the bottom-timber became less dense, and the sunlight illumined the same, so much lighter became his mind that he bethought him of his flask, and quickly swallowed a long draught of brandy, having first assured himself by a backward glance that neither mortal nor spirit was in pursuit of him.

He had jerked his horse to a halt that he might scan the back trail, and as the brandy

strengthened his nerves, he laughed jeeringly at himself for being such a fool as to permit his superstitious fears to govern him to such an extent.

He argued that there could have been nothing supernatural in the reappearing of his victim. His knife had not been thrust deep enough—that was all.

Yet those whispered words rung in his ears: "Don't go no furder, Mars' Hank!"

Those were real, and what could they mean? Did the dying negro have a glimpse into his future far enough to know that he would contemplate another murder?

It would seem so.

Then there was that cry, so near him.

He knew well that it had proceeded from female lips, and, as a matter of course, it was no other than Marion Moore, on her way from the scene of her rescue to her home.

She must have been alone, or she would not have been thus terrified.

And if so where was Morgan?

Had he heard the yell from the river, and left Marion to return alone, while he went to investigate the cause of it? This seemed the only plausible explanation of his absence.

Then arose a fresh dread in the mind of the miscreant. He was in danger of being found out, as the assassin of poor Uncle Mose!

And Manly Morgan, to whose father Mose belonged, and who valued the old man, was perhaps the one who was to fatter the evidence against him.

Yet no one would know that Mose was dead, for the corpse was in the bottom of the river, and would drift far down the stream.

Still the old negro would be missed.

But Hank could not, as far as he himself could determine, be connected with the slave's disappearance for no one had seen them together.

With all this, Hank was far from feeling safe.

That Marion had seen him, he had good reason to believe, and that was the worst of all.

How should he account for his terrified appearance, should she have noticed it, as her shriek would seem to indicate? Could she have been terrified from some other cause? It was barely possible, but he clung to the possibility.

The probability, however, was that it was he who had so startled her, and this thought really maddened him. Why should she who had known him so long a time, and been on friendly terms with him, be afraid of him?

It was exasperating to admit the supposition.

From these buried reasonings and conclusions, Hank Howard decided to return on his back trail.

He did not ride rapidly at first, but as he proceeded he became more and more furious at the thought that Marion Moore should have shrieked at the sight of him. He fancied himself justly indignant, and began to assume that air. He would brave it out, and face the music.

Driving spurs, in a very short time he dashed up to the thicket from which the cry had proceeded. There he perceived Marion upon Manley Morgan's horse.

The sight relieved him somewhat, but, at the same time, it inflamed him with jealousy; although he knew that she had been under the necessity of riding the animal of the young ranchero.

The maiden, as she had detected the return of Howard, had been dumfounded and terrified to such an extent that she was unable to urge her horse in flight. She had not recovered from the terror produced by her first discovery of the man to whom she felt such a strong aversion.

Hank strove to smile, and raised his hand to lift his hat in greeting but he found he had no hat upon his head. This set him all back.

He had not been aware of his loss.

Where was it? Had he lost it in the gully, where, when found, it would prove him to have been near the spot at which murder had been committed, if the "sign" spoke plainly?

Were there any blood-stains remaining upon the bank from which old Mose had been flung?

The confusion and consternation of the wretch were great, but he braced himself, and said:

"Parion me, Miss Marion, but I returned to find my hat, and also to ask an explanation of you."

"When I rode past a short time since, I heard a loud cry. I believe it must have been uttered by you, and I cannot imagine what there is about me that could startle one who has, for so long a time, been numbered among my dearest friends."

"I feel somewhat indignant at this. Of course, I could not, at first, account for the shriek. You have a new horse, by the way, I see."

"But, excuse me, I now recognize the animal. Is Mr. Manly Morgan escorting you? And, if so, why is he not with you?"

Marion Moore gazed into the face of the mis-

creant with a strange stare, which made his very flesh to crawl. From the first moment he had spoken, she had banished all fear; determined as she was, that she would not betray her weakness in the presence of such a man.

Could it be possible that he could speak thus of her lover, if he had harmed him?

It could not be, she thought. To a certain extent, she must have cruelly misjudged the man.

"How could I help being terrified, when a horseman gallops headlong through the undergrowth, placing me in danger of being trampled upon?" she asked, as calmly as was possible for her; "especially when you presented such a wild appearance, your clothing torn, and your hat gone."

"I was about to ask if you had seen Mr. Morgan. He was badly hurt, and I parted from him soon after his recovery. He killed a large bear, in a knife conflict; but I suppose you have seen the carcass, as you came from that direction.

"What is the matter with you to-day, Mr. Howard? You do not seem at all natural. Just the opposite, indeed, for you have contrived in some way to make yourself positively frightful."

And, indeed, Marion knew that the face of Hank had changed terribly when she had drawn his attention to the state of his attire. His facial muscles had begun to twitch nervously at her allusion to Manly's struggle with the bear.

Previous to this, Hank Howard had not been aware that his clothing was stained in many places with blood, and no wonder was it that his expression changed. Yes, his hat was gone, and his clothes torn and bloody. He looked upon himself. The maiden had an excuse, certainly, for being startled at the sight of him.

Was not this enough, and more than enough? A sudden thought. He clapped his hand to his belt.

"Hell and furies!" he muttered.

His knife was gone also!

CHAPTER VII.

CRIME AND CRIME.

The desperate position in which he had placed himself was now plain to Hank Howard. He felt that, if he could only have a little time to consider and calm himself, he would come out all right; and, by a great effort, he regained control of himself, acting most cleverly.

"Miss Marion," he began, in explanation, as he assumed a more natural appearance as far as the expression of his face was concerned; "I cannot say that I have seen the bear you speak of, but possibly I have. I most certainly have seen, and fought, and fled from a bear of great size and terribly ferocious. I yelled for help, but none came. Unfortunately for me, I had left my horse in a thicket, and was on foot when I encountered the fierce brute.

"I must acknowledge that I have been terribly frightened, for, having no rifle, and the cylinder of my revolver being clogged, thus preventing me from using the weapon, forced me to defend myself with my knife, which I lost in my flight, and my hat as well. So you see me.

"I have run hither and thither in search of my horse, which I happened at last to find by accident; and, for my life, I could not swear to where I have been, or what I have or have not seen. I have been just that much demoralized.

"But why, may I ask, were you so frightened at my appearance, when you knew so well who I was, and that I would protect you?

"Perhaps, however, you were as much upset as myself, since you say that you also have encountered a bear; and I should be the last person, under the circumstances, to question your actions."

Every word that Hank spoke removed a heavy weight from the heart of Marion. They banished suspicion from her mind. His explanation was so reasonable, and agreed so fully with matters from which suspicion had arisen, that she could not doubt one word of his story; although it did seem impossible that he could have rushed through the clear space in which she, Manly, and the carcass of the bear had lain without noticing them and halting in his flight.

But she did not refer to the proofs she and Manly had discovered of his having been there; for she preferred not mentioning them until she had first conferred with her lover.

A most depressing load had been removed from the maiden's mind, and her heart was now filled with joy and relief, for she believed Manly was safe, and that she would see him on the morrow. Nearly everything that had puzzled her had been accounted for; and, as her fears for one were banished, those for another began to return.

Marion became more than ever anxious to reach home on account of her father. She felt that she could afford to be quite pleasant with Hank; for she was not without some little self-condemnation for having believed him worse than he really was. Hence she replied pleasantly:

"You must really pardon me, Mr. Howard; but I am in no natural frame of mind. I have

been in as great danger as yourself, and would have been torn to pieces but for the timely arrival of Mr. Morgan. There were two bears, it seems—perhaps mates—and I wish, if you are going in search of what you have lost, as you probably are, that you would warn Mr. Morgan, should you see him.

"There is still danger, evidently, in the timber. Mr. Morgan is on foot. My pony ran away, and I clung to the limb of a tree, being pulled from my saddle, when the bear bounded from the thicket.

"One cause for my being greatly anxious is, that I fear the pony may have run home, and my father may fear I have met with an accident. He could not stand any serious shock, for he is very weak. So I must instantly return."

"Certainly, Miss Moore. I am really pained to know you have been so terrified, and besides, deeply sympathize with you on account of your father's precarious state of health. I hope he will be long spared to you. I will now hasten to recover my lost articles, and will, as you desire, inform Manly of the presence of Bruin, Number Two, in his vicinity."

And, with a courteous wave of his hand, the wily scoundrel spurred his horse toward the river; Marion Moore, now greatly relieved, speeding in the direction of her home, and free from any anxiety, except in connection with her father.

Hank Howard, however, did not intend to encounter Manly Morgan if he could possibly avoid it; but he did intend to search for his hat, and the tell-tale knife, and at the same time obliterate any "sign" that might have been left at the mouth of the gully, the scene of his crime.

He congratulated himself upon having cunningly invented a story that would cover all suspicious ground, but he well knew that investigation would prove it false; for no trace would be found, anywhere, of the second and mythical bear. He also knew that the same explanation would not satisfy Manly Morgan, should the suspicions of the latter have been aroused, which had more than probably been the case.

Hank, at once, sought hiding for his horse, and then treated himself to a horn of brandy.

Just how to act and proceed in the future, he knew not, and could not decide. He had noticed that Marion had flushed deeply when speaking of Morgan, and that, beyond a doubt, her extreme fright and agitation had been occasioned more from anxiety on his rival's account than aught else. This was not pleasant.

Hank seated himself, and began to think it over.

He knew that the pair had not been alone together previous to the fight with the bear; but then, there had been time and opportunity for conversation after their return to consciousness.

Which of them had been the first to recover?

That was a somewhat important question.

No doubt they had confessed their love for each other, and had exchanged vows, and all that.

Hank cursed his luck, and the world at large.

The longer he speculated upon the subject, the more furious he became; fast working himself into the murderous state that bad, but a short time previous, ruled him. Again and again he swore that Marion Moore should be his, even though he must wade in blood to gain her, willing or unwilling.

She must be either his wife or his slave.

And the first move to make toward this end was to prevent another from getting the start of him; at least any further than had been done.

He could not hope to gain the hand of Marion as long as Manly Morgan was in existence.

Hank Howard was forced to this conclusion.

He had committed a cowardly murder, that of an innocent old slave, with no motive except to prevent him from saying aught that might injure his suit with Marion Moore. Bad though he was, he despised himself for this. It was true he had, in personal difficulties, shot his man, and that more than once, by being more quick and expert with his weapons; but that, of course, could not be called murder.

This last, however, had been secretly done, and, as he had stained his hands in the blood of that harmless old man, he came to the conclusion that this was a pretty good starter in a career of crime—that, henceforth, he would not curb his passions or desires, even though he might outlaw himself. Yes, he would rather live an outlaw with Marion Moore, than an honest man without her!

Indeed, as to that, honesty was out of the question.

He was already on the verge of outlawry, but he wished to remain at home, and there study up a plot to secure the fair Marion.

Were he to be hunted for any crime, driven from the San Marcos, his chances to gain the maiden would be greatly lessened, yet gain her, by fair means or foul, he swore that he would.

She had been quite friendly with him just now, and it was still possible that he might win her love, provided Manly was out of the way. The latter was a snap-shot, however, and an expert with the knife as well; therefore he could only be removed by strategy. Hank was ready

for this, but he would not risk his own life in the business if there was any way of avoiding it.

The villain decided that he would be guided by the course of events. His first move must be to recover his hat and bowie, and then to remove all possible "sign." He could next spy upon the movements of Manly Morgan.

Taking his flask of brandy with him, Hank stole along toward the head of the gully; keeping within the thickets as much as possible, and keenly scanning the surroundings as he proceeded.

His thoughts were anything but pleasant ones.

Should Manly and Marion now meet, the girl would repeat the story Hank had told to her, and her lover would pronounce it a fabrication throughout, and this would ruin his chances forever of winning the love he so coveted.

Young Morgan must die! He must be put out of the way suddenly, as old Mose had been, and their corpses must never be found.

Their fate must remain a mystery.

When he had thus decided, the wretch had gained the head of the gully. He then stole along the bed of the same, toward the river. More slowly and stealthily he went, as he drew nearer the scene of the assassination.

He found his hat before advancing far, and, relieved even at this, he put it on his head, pressing it down hard over his brows. More desperate and in murderous he became, as he neared the mouth of the gully. Just between him and the scene of Mose's murder, a portion of the upper bank, with the bushes that grew upon the same, had slid downward half-way to the bed of the little canyon; the bush-tops drooping, and forming a close screen.

From behind this, one could look to the mouth of the gully, and beyond it, over the river. This was narrow, the branches of the heavy timber arching the waters, and shutting out the sun.

Hank Howard gained this screen of verdure, and peered through the foliage; but, instantly upon so doing, he trembled as if stricken with an ague fit, while his swarthy face became ghastly and hideous from consternation.

And well might the dastardly assassin be thus stricken, for his worst fears were realized.

Manly Morgan not only stood upon the exact spot where the murder had been committed, but was, with a long pole, sounding the cove, or feeling for something which, his suspicions led him to believe, had been thrown into the water!

As Hank had been unable to find his bowie-knife thus far, he doubted not that, in his terror he must have dropped it at the very point where he had slain the old negro. Manly must have found it, and had, besides, discovered plain evidences of the murder, in the way of foot-steps. His present attitude and actions proved this. He would not be thus occupied, were he not confident that a cowardly deed had there been perpetrated.

If he had really found the knife, he would know to whom it belonged; for the weapon had been seen in Hank's possession more than once, and the handle was of a peculiar pattern.

If Manly Morgan should find the body of old Mose, Hank would be in a fearful fix; for there were proofs enough, and more than enough to fasten the deed upon him!

The eyes of the villain glared, like those of a panther at bay, and, had the discovery not weakened him, causing him to tremble in every limb and nerve, he would have sprung forward, and hurled his rival into the river.

He reflected, too, that Manly was an expert swimmer, and so resolved that he would bide his time. But he was in a most desperate condition of mind, as to what his mode of action should be. He had lied to Marion in regard to the uselessness of his revolver, but he feared to fire the weapon lest some one should hear the report. After what he had seen, he judged it best and safest to be prudent.

Murdering a negro and murdering a white man—and one well-known and respected at that—were two entirely different things.

Hank was not ready to lead the life of an outlaw at once, yet he must do so, or else meet young Morgan in fair fight for life.

He must either kill Manly and flee, or he must remain and fight a duello; and, in that case, he felt he would have little or no chance to escape with life, for his rival, infuriated at Mose's murder, would shoot to kill.

The mind of the assassin was made up.

He would brand his soul with another cowardly crime.

Hank had no knife, and he dared not shoot; but he could club his revolver, and give a crushing blow with the butt of the weapon. This he resolved to do.

He cursed himself for his weakness, when strength was so necessary; but a draught of his favorite medicine caused him to become more steady in nerve, more confident and determined. With his teeth set, his revolver firmly gripped, and the look of a fiend upon his face, he stood ready.

Just then Manly gave a groan, and Hank saw that the young man was bending downward.

That he had fished up the corpse of old Mose, the miscreant was confident, and that he was

now in the act of drawing it upon the gully-bed.

The dread opportunity had come.

It could hardly have been more favorable.

With a murderous bound, and with his weapon uplifted, Hank Howard sprung forward behind his victim. The latter had grasped an arm of the old negro, and the groan which the villain had heard the young ranchero uttered was one of anguish, at the awful discovery he had then and there made.

Then came the sound of a hard-dealt blow, and Manly Morgan and the body of his aged and faithful slave disappeared together beneath the dark waters of the San Marcos! Silently and quickly the deed was done.

And, as before in that self-same spot, Hank Howard stood appalled—his face filled with terror, horror and dread. Thus he stood, and gazed downward into the stream.

There, in that very spot, he had on that same day committed two most dastardly crimes; sent to their long account, as he believed, two men who had never harmed him or any living creature, and that without giving them the slightest chance to defend their lives.

Stiff and rigid, with starting and staring eyes, stood Hank Howard, but for a moment only; then, by a powerful effort, he broke the awful spell that bound him, fearing again to see the head of old Mose rise up—this time, with the white and handsome face of Manly Morgan in its company.

He then darted, the second time, up the bed of the gully, as fast as fright would permit, and as crazed as on the former occasion. Direct as was possible, Hank ran to the side of his horse, bounded into the saddle, and drove spurs deep; spurring like a madman, up the river, and parallel with the same—his soul blackened with another most fearful crime.

The warning voice of poor old Mose, the words, "Don't go no furder, Mars' Hank," had been heard by the assassin in vain.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LAST OF EARTH.

MARION MOORE sped toward her home, hoping and praying that her pony had stopped to graze before reaching the house, or else had entered the corral in the rear of the dwelling without having been observed by her father. She knew that all the negroes, except a young girl Rosa by name, were either out with the herds, or at work in the corn and cotton fields at some distance from the ranch.

And Rosa was one who would be dreadfully alarmed, did anything out of the usual run of affairs occur. It seemed an age to Marion since she had left her father's side, although in reality it was not more than two hours; but the poor girl had passed through more excitement and more agonizing emotions—to say nothing of blissful ones—in that brief space than some do in a lifetime.

She had good and sufficient reason for considering this the most eventful day of her life; but, ere the sun should set, she would have more reason yet for doing so. Indeed, the most harrowing grief was soon to be hers, which, although long most sorrowfully anticipated, or known to be hers in the near future, was nevertheless most hard to bear.

When the maiden first got clear of the timber, breaking at once into the bright sunlight, she was some distance above the ranch; for she had followed a strange path, in her anxiety to reach the open plain as soon as was possible. In fact, since her recent startling, and, to her, most frightful adventures, she had a strong desire to get free from the dark shades as soon as possible; and her meeting with Hancock Howard had greatly increased that desire.

Full a quarter of a mile was she from her home; but, at once, the gallant horse broke into a fleet gallop, and Marion guided the animal in such a manner as to keep a clump of trees between her and the ranch. Then, upon nearing the corral, she dismounted, secured the horse, within the timber, and just out of view, as Manly had directed; and then advanced, with dread forebodings, to the dwelling—for her pony was not within the corral, or anywhere visible.

No sooner had the maiden turned the corner of the corral than she quickly pressed her hand upon her rapidly-palpitating heart, while she turned pale, and a look of intense agony appeared in her face and eyes.

And good reason was there for this.

Her pony, saddled and bridled, was standing opposite her home; in full view, as she knew, from where her father sat in his easy-chair on the front porch.

She felt sure, at a glance, that the animal had stampeded in fright on the plain, and had at length made halt in the extreme of fatigue, just where she now saw him. He was evidently thoroughly done up, for he held his head low, and was not grazing.

Marion could see that he was covered with foam, and was panting laboriously.

Unless her father had been for some time asleep, he must have seen her equipped steed, and have been greatly alarmed; as it indicated an accident to his only and much-loved child, and to whom he now clung so closely, in his

helpless and fatal illness. She was unable to proceed, and the emotions which ruled her at this sight made her faint and sick of heart. Then, as if influenced thus to do from some unknown and mysterious source, she gazed along the border of the timber easterly toward an enclosed cornfield, where some of the slaves were working.

Marion could scarce repress a cry of anguish; for she beheld the well-known form of Rosa, whom she had left in attendance upon her father. The girl was running, as if in terror, to the field, gesticulating wildly, and had nearly reached the rough fence.

What did this seeming fright of Rosa mean?

Marion feared to ask herself this question.

She knew that something must have happened at the house, in which there had been only her father and his servant. She knew that Rosa was superstitious, and afraid of death in any form—afraid of a corpse.

What did this signify, what could it imply, but that her father, shocked at the return of the pony without her, had had a hemorrhage, and had passed away from earth forever?

Pallid and trembling, she stood and listened. All was still about the dwelling, still as death. Did death now rule there?

Not a living, moving object was in view.

All this was dreadful to poor Marion, especially after what she had already undergone.

Were the bright sun, and the brilliant flowers, and the singing-birds mocking her?

Could death reign amid such surroundings?

Could her happy home be now desolate, and she a lonely orphan, in a strange land?

Even then, Marion could think of Manly Morgan, and remember that he at least was left to love, cherish and protect her.

She summoned all her strength, casting off the fearful depression, hoping and praying that all might yet be well. Then she staggered on toward the dwelling; for the first time in her life repudiating the sweet that peeped up smiling at her from the grass that bordered her path. Marion saw them not.

Soon she reached the end of the house, and a few steps more would enable her to glance around the corner, and along the veranda. But again she halted, and leaned against the wall of the building, with wildly dilating eyes and ghastly face. And no wonder.

The dwelling was silent as a tomb!

She had hoped to hear the sound made by her father rocking back and forth in his chair, a sound which had been, for years, such sweet and comforting music to her. Never before, except in the night, had the house seemed so still.

Even the birds appeared to keep aloof from the dwelling, or was this her fancy? Had her gloomy forebodings given this color to everything before her, clouding a pleasanter reality?

Marion was weak and trembling, but she must go on. The suspense was too torturing to bear.

She was compelled to keep one hand against the wall, to support her; and thus the poor girl, step by step, advanced to the corner of the house. Yet she feared to glance around.

Hard pressed was her hand against her breast, to control the dull, hard, and quick beating of her heart. At length she leaned forward, her gold-crowned head bending lower from behind the corner of the building, until she had a view of the entire wide veranda.

There sat her father, as usual, in his chair: his feet resting upon another, and the rockers of the one in which he sat, blocked by two pieces of wood to keep it in position. He seemed to be comfortably reclining, just as she had many a time arranged it for him at his request; indeed, as she remembered upon a moment's reflection, exactly as she had left him when she set out on her ride.

Had he, then, been asleep all the time she had been away, which seemed so long?

This did not appear probable.

Was he asleep, or could he—But, no!

Marion shuddered. It could not be.

He could not look more pallid in death than when she had left him; except that hectic spot on his cheeks. There was no flush now.

She tried to think that he slept, and that she could not have the heart to awake him.

Carefully she stepped upon the veranda, striving to feel angry with Rosa for having left him alone.

Thus the maiden strove to crowd down the belief in her father's death, which everything seemed to prove. She stole along, her eyes fixed in a strange and unnatural stare upon the still face before her. He appeared unaware of her approach. There was no longer a red spot upon his cheek. It was like marble.

This Marion saw, and her heart nearly ceased its pulsations. He could not be asleep, for his eyes were wide open, yet he stirred not.

No longer did she approach with the noiseless steps.

Firmly she put down her feet upon the hard floor. Yet he remained as before.

How ghastly and death-like he was!

And Marion was little less so.

Surely no more proofs were needed. But they were there, and the poor girl came near falling in a faint when the sanguine stains upon his shirt front were at length visible.

Not until then was all hope banished. She tottered forward and sunk upon her knees.

Beside his chair she knelt, clasping the hands that were now like ice. Marion Moore uttered no cry. She had not the strength.

Like a flower, broken from its parent stem, and withering in the sun, she sunk lower and lower.

Never again would those hands clasp hers in love. Never again would they wander among her golden tresses. Gone, dead, without one parting word—gone, never to return!

Dead! Dying thus, alone, with none to cheer his last moments or smooth his dying pillow, while she, the one he most loved on earth, was perhaps listening rapturously to the words of love spoken by another—by one whom she had known but a brief time!

It was terrible, awful! Could she live through it?

Her brain seemed bursting, whirling madly within a burning casket. At length she lifted her head, and gazed around her. There was a strange, unnatural appearance in her eyes.

She looked dazed, bewildered. She caught at the arm of the chair, and struggled to her feet.

Then, and not till then, did she perceive the smile that rested upon the still face.

There was no indication of a painful death—just the opposite—he seemed, indeed he undoubtedly had passed away in a painless manner, gliding into a peaceful sleep, amid bright and happy visions.

"Oh, God, I thank Thee—I thank Thee for this!"

So Marion whispered, her hands clasped and her eyes raised heavenward. The words brought relief to her overtaxed brain, and the tears rolled down her pallid cheeks. The awful strain upon her nerves was relaxed.

Just then the slaves, with startled faces, came up to the end of the veranda, each striving to keep another in advance, and clinging to each other's garments, their mouths open.

Rosa was in the rear of the entire party, appearing dumfounded at discovering her young mistress by the side of her dead master.

The eldest negress, the "Auntie" of the ranch, who was factotum and general housekeeper when she did not prefer to be with the jolly field hands, spoke a few low words to the others, and, with gestures, ordered all except Rosa to retire to the rear of the dwelling.

"Don't yer see de young missus am' nigh 'bout bu'stin' her heart? I 'clar' I didn't b'lieve yer, Rosa; but hit 'pears like de good Lawd done tuck pore Mars' Morris ter Hissell, sho'! He's done bin dyin' a long time, an' we'-uns orten't ter take on too much, 'ka'se he's bin tooken outen his misery an' bes gone home at last."

With this parting address "Auntie Dine," as the old woman was called, beckoned Rosa to follow her, and the two went to the front of the veranda. Dinah saw clearly that the management of everything now devolved on her.

Upon having been informed by Rosa that their master was dead, the negroes had yelled and howled fearfully, but old Dine, with no little trouble, had, at length, prevailed on them to leave the field, and go with her to the ranch.

Had not the death of their master been long expected, their grief and excitement would have been great and uncontrollable.

Aunt Dinah stepped upon the veranda, and placed her ebon hand on Marion's shoulder.

"Don't cry so, chile," she said. "De good Lawd hab tuck Mars' Morris at last outen this sufferin' world, an' He knows best what's good fer we'-uns. I knows, Miss Marion, hit's dreadful; but, bress yer soul, honey—"

Here the old negress broke down, and sobbed violently. The touching grief of the young mistress whom she idolized was too much for the philosophy she preached, but found herself unable to practice. All she could do was to mutter, again and again:

"Bress de Lawd, an' bress my young missis; but hit's dreadful, hit's dreadful!"

In a little time, however, Auntie Dine seemed to awaken to the necessity of action, in connection with the case of her mistress, and the disposal of the dead.

Taking Marion in her arms, as she had often done when she was a child, the old woman carried the now hysterical maiden into the house; Rosa following closely, even clinging to Aunt Dinah's skirts, and casting glances of terror toward the corpse, as if she feared her master would arise from his chair, and his long sleep, and follow them.

Utterly exhausted, poor Marion was laid upon her couch in her own apartment, and Rosa left by her bedside, to watch her and minister to her wants. This done, old Dinah hastened to the slaves' quarters, and dispatched one of the men for a physician; bidding him ride to San Marcos as fast as he could. Another was sent in haste to the Morgans, who were the nearest neighbors and the most intimate and respected friends of the dead ranchero and his daughter.

Having seen these messengers mounted upon fleet horses, Auntie Dine ordered her "ole man,"

an aged and trusted slave of the Moore family, to get another negro man, belonging to the Morgans, to assist him in preparing his master's body for burial.

Certain it was, that the old negress proved herself equal to the occasion, and an excellent manager of affairs, even under the most depressing and distressing circumstances; for she neglected not to see that a young darky caught and cared for Marion's pony. Fortunate it was that there was one individual on the ranch, who was not so much excited and demoralized as to prevent his being able to manage affairs, for poor Marion was utterly prostrated, and no wonder.

Indeed, she was in danger of brain fever.

Had she known, in addition to everything else, that Manly Morgan had been knocked senseless, over the bank of the Rio San Marcos, by the miscreant Hank Howard, there is little doubt that it would have caused her death; for the consciousness that she was loved by him who was all the world to her, and who would love and guard her through life, more than filling the place of her dead father in her heart, was all that prevented the poor maiden from giving up in hopeless despair, and dying in her first great grief. But, in blissful ignorance of this, she slept.

Silence reigned at Moore Ranch, and deeper silence in the gully near the San Marcos.

CHAPTER IX.

PAINT PETE.

FOR some months previous to the events we have thus far recorded, it had been known that a regularly organized band of outlaws had a rendezvous within a day or two's ride of San Marcos Springs.

These bandits stole horses, robbed ranches, and in many instances shot down, without mercy, those who resisted them. Their depredations extended even to Austin and San Marcos, many people believing that they lived in caverns above the Blanco Falls. And this was true, as will be hereafter seen; for we shall have more or less to do with these outlaws in the course of our narrative.

About the time that Marion Moore was intercepted in her ride by the huge bear, a half-dozen rough-garbed, bearded and long-haired men, whose appearance was as desperate as can be imagined, rode into the timber, on the opposite side of the Blanco River, from the locality at which the events we have recorded took place. Each of these men was well mounted, and armed to the teeth; and each had in lead, by neck-ropes, a valuable horse—the animals having evidently been stolen from ranches or ranges down the river.

Their movements and actions were cautious and stealthy, their eyes continually darting suspicious glances in all directions. They had "hugged" the timber as they advanced upstream; that is, they kept close to the margin of the stream, to better avoid discovery, and, in case of being seen, that they might easily turn into the shades, and evade enemies, or defend themselves to better advantage. Directly toward the San Marcos they rode, along a cattle-path; riding singly for a full quarter of a mile—the width of the belt of timber—and halting not until they could see the waters between the trees.

They then threw themselves from their saddles, manifesting strong evidences of fatigue, both men and horses having the appearance of having endured a long and tedious journey.

As the hour was quite early, it was probable that they had been on the move all night, having stolen the horses the previous evening.

Their every movement spoke of long experience in roughing it in the wilds, and good discipline as well, every one seeming to have his regular duties to perform, and that without any orders.

The horses were all secured in a natural "open," where there was abundance of rich grass—one of the men remaining to guard the animals, while the others secreted their equipments and camp-tricks in another clear space, which was surrounded by a dense circle of thorny thickets, and in the center of which was an excavation in the ground, some two feet in depth—the earth which had been removed to form it having been placed on the border of the hole.

Within this was a bed of ashes, proving that it had not only been a camp-fire, but had been used by those who did not wish it to be seen by others. The present occupants appeared so much at home, that it was quite evident they had been there on a previous occasion.

But little time was lost in preparing a substantial breakfast, the materials for which were produced from the pack of one of the stolen horses. This, however, did not seem sufficient in variety; so one of the outlaws, taking a strong line and hook from his saddle-bags, proceeded to the river to secure some fish.

He used great care in choosing a position among the bushes, from which he was not in danger of being discovered from the opposite bank by any chance traveler.

The same cruel fates, that seemed to be showering down agony and death upon the trails of

both Manly and Marion, appeared to be instrumental also, at this particular time, in drawing the gang of bandits to that point; or, at all events, in influencing that one of their number to add fish to the breakfast bill of fare. This we shall see later on.

Paint Pete, who had gained this cognomen from being an expert in coloring white spots of hair upon the hides of horses the same shade as that on the remainder of the animal thus thoroughly balking the owner, should be come up with his stolen property, from being able to identify it as his own, was the fisherman who has been mentioned; and he had very poor luck, so much so, that he "set" his pole, and returned with two moderate sized cat-fish to his comrades, who growled not a little.

All, however, were soon in the enjoyment of a repast that lacked not either in quantity or quality aside from the supply of fish.

After Pete had satisfied his appetite, he returned to his post, or rather his pole, filling his pipe as he walked, and was soon enjoying a smoke, after removing a five-pound cat-fish from his hook which had been caught during his absence.

Seated in such a manner that he could command a view of the opposite bank, Paint Pete smoked lazily, in complete enjoyment of his rest after a long ride; in fact, he had deprived himself of a *siesta* with his pards, that he might enjoy his pipe and rod. But he was in danger of falling asleep for all that, as he had traveled far and fast when he should have been reposing. And most assuredly would he have drifted into somnolence, had he not detected the presence of a man on the opposite bank, who at once excited his curiosity, strict attention, and wonder. This man was crouched in the mouth of a gully that divided the opposite bank, and was apparently awaiting the approach of some game which he intended to kill; for Pete caught the gleam of a knife. The outlaw thought it a strange way to hunt, and a strange weapon besides.

Not for a moment did he entertain the suspicion that the lurker was lying in wait for a human being. Yet, such was the true state of affairs. The man was Hank Howard.

And when Pete witnessed the murder of old Mose, the hurling of his body into the river, and the evident terror of the assassin as the corpse arose again to the surface—Hank fleeing with a loud shriek up the gully—then the bandit was himself appalled and mystified.

He had witnessed many bloody combats, and, in the frenzy of fight, had slain his man more than once, but never had he butchered an unarmed and defenseless old man, as the stranger over the river had done before his eyes. It was a far different matter, to view a fight between two armed men, from gazing at a man armed with a bowie, and in hiding, springing upon another who was without weapons, and too astonished and frightened to defend himself even if armed, and to see a knife thrust into a helpless being, and his body flung into the river to conceal the crime.

Besides, the murderer was strong, young and quick of movement, while his victim had the appearance of being old, feeble, and worn with toil. Paint Pete shuddered as he exclaimed:

"Great Scott! That thar war jist turrible—jist right down dev'lish an' nary! Dang me, ef I ain't a angel compared with that galoot! He's a butcher o' humans an' nothin' else, an' I hez him spotted fer keeps, yer kin bet!"

Hank, when peering into the river, had been in plain view of Pete, who saw distinctly his expression of face, with all its superstitious horror, and he knew he would be able to recognize the assassin wherever he would see him.

Pete felt positive that the loud cry of the cowardly murderer had been heard by his comrade who was guarding the horses, and that it had perhaps awakened those who had recently laid down to rest, so he hastened to them, explaining that there was no danger, but that a man across the stream was raising a rumpus, and he intended to watch him.

Having thus quieted their alarm, Paint Pete returned to his fishing, and to watch for any further developments, although he did not expect to see the murderer again, or any other person for that matter. He knew the exact location of the three ranches beyond the San Marcos, and he believed the assassin belonged to one of them.

If so, there might be money in it.

Certain it was that no man would kill his own slave in that manner, and he had no right to slay one belonging to another. There was some mystery in the crime, Pete believed, and as the motive of the murder had not been robbery, it must be revenge, and that either upon the negro or upon his owner.

The crime was as strange as it was cowardly. So Pete decided, and he determined to know more in regard to it before he left the camp, if it was possible and prudent to investigate.

One thing he congratulated himself upon, and that was that he had distinctly seen the face of the dastard, and would know it again; besides, he had his build, bight and complexion "down fine" in his memory, and Paint Pete rarely forgot anything.

He fished patiently, but paid more attention to the opposite bank, although it seemed very unreasonable and foolish to do so. But, as there was nothing else that he could do, he remained.

Ere long, his perseverance was rewarded by the discovery of another man, who had evidently trailed the murdered negro; for he came from the same direction, and sprung down into the gully, where he began inspecting the bed of the same.

Pete saw the new-comer pick up a knife, evidently the weapon with which the murderer had been committed, and which, in his terror, the assassin had dropped. Again the stranger, who was a tall and athletic young man, and with an open and honest face, examined the bed of the gully. He then peeped over the bank.

"He's a keen one, he air, and knows P from Q," was the mental comment of the outlaw.

He knew, at a glance, that the last comer was just the opposite in character to the other, and that it was probably against him he was seeking proofs. He had perhaps heard the yell.

However that might have been, it was soon apparent that he was satisfied the waters covered a ghastly secret, for he cut a slender sapling, leaving a prong, the ends of which he sharpened. His object was not evident to Pete.

He was about to fish up the corpse!

The bandit preferred angling for cat-fish.

The stranger, as the reader already knows, was Manly Morgan; and he began to fish for poor old Mose, although he had not the slightest suspicion who it was that had been stabbed, and thrown into the river. Pete paid no attention to his line.

His whole interest was in the man across the waters. Everything was most strange and mysterious.

What would come of it all?

Paint Pete had no idea that there was a more startling event to follow. He gazed with intense interest, and soon knew that the stranger had touched the corpse with his pole.

He saw Manly bend down, and then reach and clutch an arm, drawing the body up partly free of the water, uttering a groan, in evident grief and dismay. This, with the expression of the young man's face, proved that the murdered slave had been valued and esteemed by him, and that it was not the mere loss in dollars which his master lamented.

A still greater surprise awaited Pete. He came very near giving a yell of warning, but he saw he was too late. The assassin again appeared upon the scene, and stealthily as before. He sprung up behind the man, who was now holding the dripping body, and struck him a terrific blow with the butt of a revolver. He fell into the stream, with the corpse, and both sunk beneath the waters!

Pete stood, with mouth agape, and staring.

He could hardly believe his senses.

The murderer of the two men stood at the entrance of the gully for a moment, and then as though the fiends were after him, he sped up the same as before, and disappeared.

"Dang me, ef that ain't startin' the butcher biz! A reg'lar contrack fer furnishin' grub fer all ther cat-fish in ther San Marcos!" growled Paint Pete, indignantly. Then he continued—

"I'm a tough cuss, ginerly spokin', but I'll sw'ar that's too much fer me! I'll make a try ter save that ranchero's bacon, dead sure."

As he spoke, the bandit divested himself of his clothing, and then plunged into the stream, swimming to the opposite bank.

Diving into the water at the cove, Pete brought the senseless form of Morgan up, and supported his head above the surface. He then swam back to the other side, dragging his prize up the bank, and laying the young man upon it with his face downward.

Swimming back to the cove, the outlaw secured the corpse of old Mose, and with much trouble and exertion, succeeding in placing it in a sitting posture on the bank of the gully, and at the very point from which the poor old negro had tumbled down to his death.

Observing the knife of the murderer, which Manly had found and laid upon a projection of the bluff near him, and which Hank had failed to see, Pete took the weapon, and thrust it into the ground which the same blade had made in the slave's breast; saying, in soliloquy:

"Thar, I reckon I've did one fa'r an' square action! I hates a or'nary 'Pache fer layin' fer a pilgrim like a painter, but a white man what'll do that way air jist dispis'able; an' so I've tuck consider'ble trouble ter hev' him git found out. Reckon ther knife 'll gi'n ther cuss away. Hit looks like hit mought."

"Dang ef hit doesn't make me shiver, ter look at that old dead nigger! I doesn't want no more water circassin' in mine."

Paint Pete returned as he had come, resumed his clothing and arms, and then examined the prize whom he had saved from the depths of the Rio San Marcos.

He soon ascertained that the rescued man was alive, but it was evident he had received such a fearful blow that it would be some length of time before he recovered.

Pete was in a quandary as to what disposal to

make of him. The man was now dependent upon him, that was certain. He resolved to hold council with his comrades.

Without taking much time to deliberate, he decided, however, that his pards would be angry with him; and that they would be in favor of leaving the stranger to take his chances of life or death, by being discovered by his friends and cared for, or not, as it might happen.

But this did not meet Pete's view of the case.

He saw that the nearly-drowned young man was richly attired for a ranchero, that he had the best of arms buckled about his waist, and was unquestionably one who belonged in the higher walks of life, as life was in the Lone Star State at that time.

From this he reasoned that if he took this stranger to their stronghold until his recovery, or, if he quickly recovered, held him captive, that a heavy ransom might be paid for him; or the young ranchero might himself pay a large sum to be returned to his home and friends. This was no more than natural, and was worth trying for.

Paint Pete was determined, in his own mind, on this course, but he must first win his pards over to his way of thinking.

CHAPTER X.

SEEKING REST AND FINDING NONE.

PAINT PETE did not consider it necessary to bind the limbs of his captive, and young Morgan lay as still and silent as if dead, his hair saturated with blood, and his head much swollen and bruised where he had been struck the murderous blow by Hank Howard.

Pete lay down and slept until the sun was far past meridian, and when he awoke he found his captive in the same position. The outlaw was surprised and concerned. He did not wish his prize to die, and he proceeded to examine Manly at once.

An irregular fluttering of the heart, and, at times, regular beats of the pulse, proved to Pete that the man still lived; so he at once placed him in a more natural and comfortable position. He then rejoined his pards, and, in his own peculiar manner, related the strange and startling scenes he had witnessed, and told of his rescue of the wounded man from the river.

He also asserted his belief in having a "soft snap" on the heavy reward, or ransom; or, that the captive himself, upon recovery, would pay a big price for liberty; explaining that, judging from the condition of the man at that time, he would not know to what section of the country he was taken, even if he was not blindfolded. And this, too, could be done if they all thought it necessary.

They could take him to their stronghold, and await developments, keeping him captive until arrangements should be made with him for his liberty, and all money transactions could be performed without risk to the band. Pete volunteered that, when they should all reach the rendezvous, and he had had sufficient rest—say one square night's sleep—he would return in disguise to the San Marcos, and spy out the lay of things in connection with all that he had just witnessed; without doubt ascertaining the amount the band might expect to "corral" from the captive.

So plausible were the arguments of Paint Pete, that the party of pards in outlawry were forced to admit, upon inspecting Manly Morgan's condition, his clothing and arms, that there was money in the business, and little or no risk.

It was, therefore, agreed that the strangely acquired captive should be taken to their retreat, and the start made as previously determined upon—that is, as soon as the gloom of night favored their traveling without danger to themselves, for they would be obliged to pass several ranches, and to ride within a very short distance of the town.

The young ranchero was carried into their camp, and laid on a blanket upon the sward.

His head was bathed by Pete, and a healing salve applied; after which whisky was poured, in a tiny stream, down the senseless man's throat. He soon gave evidences of life.

His gaze wandered here and there, above him among the foliage, and then from one of the outlaw's faces to another, yet with no manifest interest.

It was a listless and vacant stare, which betrayed a derangement of the brain, the result of the severe blow he had received.

He made no movement to arise, but lay as quiet and listless as a fatigued child.

Pete spoke to him, bending close to his ear, but he gave no signs of having heard, or, if he did hear, he understood not a word.

"He's hed a deuce of a knock, pards," said Paint Pete, decidedly. "Hit's jist es I tol' yer, an' he'll not be wo'th shucks fer some suns."

"If he glides through O. K., es be orter—bein' nater'ly stout built an' full o' vim—we'll corral duckets from him, you bet! an' jist remember thar ain't no discount 'bout my lingo. He'll come ter hisself arter a while, I reckon. We'll pack him on a extra nag, an' he won't know whether we're goin' down-country er up, er sailin' on ther Gulf."

All agreed that Pete was right, and they favored his proposal in regard to taking Manly to their stronghold; as he would give but little trouble, and there was no danger in the act, in the state in which he then was.

So, after a late supper, Pete forcing some strong coffee down the throat of Manly, the gang packed up everything, the captive being placed upon a horse in a natural position, which he maintained without any apparent exertion. This was greatly to the relief of Pete, who, however, upon being advised thus to do, secured a rope about the poor fellow's waist, and attached it to the horn of the saddle.

Thus the outlaws started, leaving the timber, and riding singly along the border of the same—all except Paint Pete, who rode beside his captive.

Darkness screened them from view, and they passed the town of San Marcos and thence toward the Rio Blanco and the wild region in which the ridge known as Devil's Backbone is situated.

Thus, in the power of bandits—better men, however, every one of them, than Hank Howard—poor Manly Morgan was taken—each step of the horse he rode widening the distance between him and those nearest and dearest to him, his loved parents and Marion Moore.

In this way were parted the lovers, on the very day in which they had known the happiest moments of their lives. And yet the condition in which Manly was was far preferable to the anguish he would have suffered, had he known the bereavement that had fallen upon her who was so dear to him.

And Marion, could she have seen her lover, thus borne from her, and realized his sad condition—this, added to the great grief which was already hers, would have brought to her despair if not death. Even in such a case, there was something for which to be thankful.

The outlaws reached their rendezvous on the following forenoon—the wild, almost barren Devil's Backbone. Rough and rent rocks formed the ridge, with stunted trees and wild grass here and there, finding but scant soil to nourish them.

After much uneven journeying through Purgatory, above Blanco Falls, the home of the lawless horde was reached. It was a series of caverns, approached by a narrow defile, and easily defended against superior numbers.

But young Morgan noticed nothing. He appeared incapable of any emotion. Indeed, a high fever had set in. Prompt attention was required, and Pete secured the services of one of his pards, who was called the doctor of the band, to do all he could for the captive, who was placed in a cave-chamber, and provided with all that they could furnish him for his comfort.

The "Doctor" was well versed in herbal treatment, and he promised to bring the captive through all right as soon as the fever should have run its course. He had no doubt that the young man would soon recover.

Having every confidence in this learned opinion, Paint Pete deprived himself of his promised sleep, and, mounted upon a fresh horse, started back to the San Marcos; being more interested in this mysterious case than he had ever been in anything before. He was bound, too, as he said, to work a "pay racket."

The others, with their leader, Captain Boss Brander, as he was called by his men, made sport of Pete, and his enthusiastic interest in the captive—asserting that he would wish he had left him in the San Marcos, before another moon. But Pete paid no attention to them, maintaining an air of importance and confidence.

This he bore out, by departing on his mission.

But, we must return to the Rio San Marcos.

When Howard galloped along the up-river path at dangerous speed, considering the vines and undergrowth in his way, speeding from the scene of his most cowardly crimes, he was probably the most terrified specimen of humanity alive. His swarthy face showed plainly his abject terror. He seemed like one trying to escape from himself if he could.

Hank well knew that he had placed his neck in a rope at last—that the rancheros of San Marcos would show him no mercy, even on his father's account, did the fearful crimes he had committed become known, and brought home to him.

The snorts of his horse, the whisking of bush and branch as he shot along, seemed to him the laughter and whispering of demons. His hair stood on end, his nerves trembled and twitched, and that organ which performed the duty of a heart would spring into his throat at times, as some dread possibility occurred to him. Then, it would seem to cease beating altogether, causing him to become faint as death itself.

He drove spurs almost continuously, for his very life appeared to him to depend upon the distance he placed between himself and that dark cove of waters, which screened from the view of the world the corpses of his victims.

Would those bodies rise again, and act as silent proofs of his awful crimes?

Had he left any plain "sign," that would betray his presence at the cove?

"Surely not. But then—where was his knife? No sooner did this thought occur to him, than Hank Howard, with a groan, jerked his horse to a halt, and whirled the animal half about. But he did not allow the beast to make one step in the direction of Moore Ranch.

He sat, his serpent-like eyes, glassy and horrible in expression, fixed in a dread stare, down along the dark shades which extended a full mile to the fatal cove; but which seemed to be but a flimsy vail between him and it, to the dastard. He presented a picture that any one would shudder to look upon. His punishment, truly, had begun!

What would he not have given to be as free from crime, even as he had been when he rode down that same path in the morning?

Black, indeed, was his soul now!

No hope did there seem for him to escape being found out, now that he perceived he had left his bowie behind him. He now remembered having seen Manly Morgan with it in his hand. There was a bare possibility that it might have fallen into the water when he knocked Manly over the bank; but it would not do to trust to there being any doubts in the case. The knife must be found.

It seemed as if his life now depended upon finding that fatal blade!

Previous to his attempt on the life of Manly Morgan, Hank had decided upon the life of an outlaw; upon instant flight from that section of the country. But of this he thought not now. The decision, it would seem had been banished entirely from his mind.

Demoralized as his brain was, this was not strange.

He had not even considered the fact that he had met Marion Moore, and that she knew he had gone toward the point where Manly was searching the timber to ascertain who had yelled as if in great peril. But this flashed upon his mind, when he sat his horse, thinking in regard to the knife.

He groaned, and ground his teeth together.

Evidence of his guilt was closing around him so thickly, that he could see no avenue of escape, when young Morgan should be missed. Marion would tell all, and he, having been the only person in the vicinity, would be held responsible; or he would be under the strongest suspicion, while close investigation would furnish the most ample proofs.

So wrought up did Hank become by such thoughts, that he was nearly insane. He writhed in his saddle, cursing himself and all the world; having recourse to his brandy flask, which, to his horror, he now found was lost also. This was the climax of the wretch's misery. He recollects that he had not drank since leaving the cove.

He dared not go home, and meet the gaze of his outraged father, whom he had so often disgraced and rendered miserable.

He felt sure that the old ranchero would know from his manner and appearance, that he had been concerned in some criminal act; and, when it became known that young Morgan was missing, would be the first to suspect his son of murder.

The longer Hank was deprived of strong drink, the more terrified he became; and, realizing in a measure that this was the case, he resolved to procure the necessary stimulant at all hazards. He felt, too, that it was an absolute necessity that he should return to the scene of his crime, and ascertain if his knife was there; besides searching for his flask, a costly affair, and well known as his.

Yet Hank shuddered at the mere thought of again visiting that horrible cove.

He would die of terror. But then, he must have liquor, and he must procure it without the knowledge of others. How to accomplish this he knew not, yet it must be done.

There were few rancheros who could boast of having a cellar under their dwellings, but there was one at Morgan Ranch, and it had a window on each side, thus allowing free circulation of air. Hank had been in it with Manly many a time.

If he had not been suffering the torments of the lost in his mad thirst for brandy, he would not have dreamed of entering the house of the father of his victim, and that with burglarious intent.

As it was, he hesitated not an instant.

He was in a condition to do anything, no matter how unreasonable it might be.

He sped wildly to the nearest point of the timber—to the ranch of the Morgans.

Securing his horse, Hank stole forward to the building. Soon he was in the basement, without having been observed.

Striking a match, he selected, with insane eagerness, a brandy-bottle from a shelf, removed the cork, and drank long and deep.

He needed quiet and secure hiding for a time, and he had found a suitable place.

He sat down, leaning against the wall.

Outside it had seemed very hot to him, but here it was delightfully cool. The murderer enjoyed the change. He drank again, and a drowsy feeling came over him.

The change in the atmosphere, and the comparative freedom from fright had the effect of inducing sleep, which he greatly needed.

The consequence was that Hank Howard was soon in a death-like slumber, and that on the premises of the man whose son he had as he believed assassinated.

Drinking men quite frequently find themselves in strange places, which, for all the world, they would not enter when sober; but no man, it is probable, was ever more strangely situated at such a time than Hank Howard, the dastardly assassin of the Rio San Marcos.

CHAPTER XI.

SCREWING HIS COURAGE TO THE STICKING POINT.

IT was some time before Hank Howard awoke, and then he knew not where he was.

He still clutched the brandy bottle, and again he raised it to his parched lips. This had an immediate effect, for his stomach was empty, and fever raged in his blood. He became more self-reliant, more confident that he would be able to breast the dark waves which threatened him, and which had driven him nearly insane. Hank became more desperate. He would brave out the whole business.

To betray unusual emotions would only serve to fasten the crimes upon him.

Indeed, he began to believe that the bodies would not be found, or that any evidences would direct suspicion toward him, provided he recovered his bowie and flask.

Even these he could account for having lost, in the same manner that he had to Marion Moore. He would stick to the story he had told her, and, did a rain-storm but come up, he would be sure of safety from being connected with the disappearance of Manly Morgan and old Uncle Mose.

Thus pondered the assassin, there, in the dark cellar, at times drinking copiously; until he was startled by the sound of a galloping horse approaching the dwelling.

Hank trembled in spite of the fictitious strength which the brandy had given him.

He staggered to his feet, and to the window nearest the veranda, and thanked fortune that dense shrubbery screened him from view, for it enabled him to crawl out, and from amid the bushes, he felt sure that he could hear a message being delivered.

Was it the news of Manly's death now being brought to his aged parents?

The horse galloped directly past the covert of Hank Howard, and to the end of the veranda, but a few paces distant.

Hank heard the rush of footsteps along the veranda, and several hasty questions.

"I's got bad news, Mars'," he heard, in the voice of one of the slaves from Moore Ranch.

Hank's heart sprung to his throat.

"Pore old Mars' done gone dead," the negro continued; "an' Miss Marion she's jist cryin' herself to deff. Auntie Dine done told me ter ax yer wouldn't yer come ter de ranch. We's all broke up."

Ejaculations of sorrow and pity for Miss Moore, Hank could hear from Mr. and Mrs. Morgan; and then a question from the old gentleman to the negro, which caused the listener to strain his sense of hearing to the utmost. The villain strove to be firm.

"Is my son Manly at Moore Ranch?"

"I hasn't see'd Mars' Manly," was the reply.

Hank waited no longer. He had heard enough to give him food for thought.

The murder had not been discovered. That was a great relief, for there was yet time to search for the knife and flask.

Besides this, the death of Marion's father would center attraction at Moore Rancho, and thus cause delay in searching for the young man. There would be less anxiety, as well, in regard to Manly's absence.

Hank crawled back through the window.

Perspiration, in great beads, stood on his forehead.

He had passed through a fearful ordeal, believing that he was about to hear the messenger report the finding of the two bodies. He sat down, and thought over what he had just overheard. It rejoiced his vile heart, for now Marion Moore was alone and unprotected. She was an orphan, and without relatives.

As Manly Morgan was now out of the ring, he would have matters in his own hand; that is, provided his crimes were not brought home to him. Braced by the brandy, Hank resolved to act at once. He would set his mind to rest in regard to the articles lost.

Upon reflection, however, it occurred to him that it would be more prudent to await the departure of Mr. and Mrs. Morgan.

He could hear them bustling about in the dwelling, and more than once caught the name of their son in their conversation.

Soon he heard the horses being led up.

This was a favorable time for him to leave the cellar without being observed, for the old couple would ride over the plain to Moore Ranch, and not through the timber; besides the negroes would be in front of the dwelling, to see their master and mistress off. Catching up a fresh

bottle of brandy, Hank stole out of the window, and soon stood beside his horse in the shades.

The poor beast was in a much fatigued condition, having neither grazed nor drank all day. The miscreant thought of this now, for he realized that he might be forced to depend upon the animal for his life.

He therefore led him toward the river, allowing the horse to drink until satisfied, and then gave him a half-hour's time to tear the grass from the sod in an adjacent "open"; as he knew that, by that time, it would be sufficiently dark to prevent any one from recognizing him, except at very close quarters.

Some of the slaves might be coming up the path from Moore Ranch, on errands in connection with their master's death.

Hank waited, as has been said, and, when the time had expired, drank until all fear had left him as he believed, and he felt daring and desperate enough for anything; even for the trip he had, a short time previous, almost as soon meet death as undertake. He mounted, and rode slowly along on the down river path. He went slowly, for he was not without suspicions that there might be searchers out after Manly Morgan.

He judged that Marion Moore had been so prostrated by the shock of her father's death, that she would not, for a time, consider the absence of Manly from the ranch very extraordinary; and that, by the time a general alarm had been started, and search made, he would have removed every tell-tale trace that could be seen in the night by torchlight.

Hank's horse had little inclination to proceed away from its home at that hour, after such a fatiguing day; and he was compelled to keep a stiff rein, and an eye on the animal, which appeared besides to be nervous and frightened. This manner of the beast had a bad effect upon the mind of the rider; for he began to think that the horse must scent something that it feared, in the distance. He drew his revolver, and cocked the weapon, resolving to go on if all the fiends barred his way.

He flattered himself that he feared neither man nor devil, and indeed the brandy had blurred his brain to such an extent, that he actually meditated abducting Marion Moore, should there be the slightest indication of the murder of Manly Morgan being fixed upon him; for he knew that death, in a most ignominious manner would at once follow, did he not account satisfactorily for his presence near the scene of the murder so close upon the time when it had, to all appearance, been committed.

Hank knew it was in the power of Marion to give most conclusive evidence against him; and, to be convicted through her testimony, would be terrible to him!

But, he swore that he would not be convicted—that he would not even place himself in a position to be taken, after danger threatened.

He rode on, until near the head of the gully, when he secured his horse in a thicket, and took another draught from the bottle.

Only a short distance intervened between him and the spot he so dreaded. It was but a few yards to the cove, the dark waters of which held the young master and the old slave, both equal at last.

The eyes of the miscreant were fixed upon the river, as though gazing upon the real instead of the imaginary. But it seemed more real to him, in his disordered mental condition, than any reality; except that the face of Uncle Mose had lost its forgiving look, and there was instead an expression of condemnation.

Then the dastard recalled the last words of his poor old black victim:

"Don't go no furder, Mars' Hank!"

He could now read their full signification.

Hank Howard trembled. He had, indeed, gone "furder." He had disobeyed the warning of the poor old negro, and slain his young master, even while the latter was striving to remove his murdered slave from the stream.

The wretch laughed in self-mockery, but it was horrible in sound and startled him.

Strive as he would, he could not drive those strange words from his mind. Again they seemed to be whispered in his ears:

"Don't go no furder, Mars' Hank!"

Was he not, even now, intending to go still further in his fearful career of crime?

Had he not resolved, ay, sworn that he would possess Marion Moore, willing or unwilling?

Would the carrying out of this oath be as much regretted as the slaying of Manly Morgan?

"Bosh!" he muttered, as these questioning thoughts were forced upon him. "I'm getting weak in the knees, and at this stage of the game it won't do; my neck is in the noose, sure, if I don't find that infernal knife and flask. Find them I must."

"I'll carry out my plans to the letter. I've begun well, and luck has been on my side so far. Perhaps it will see me out. The devil is good to his own, they say."

As he spoke, the ominous hoot of a huge owl, which flapped its immense wings in the dark, moss-draped branches over his head, caused Hank to tremble as if spoken to by an accusing spirit, or as if the Evil One himself had ap-

proved his words. The owl, in Hank's belief, was a bird of ill-omen, and he had many a time turned back from an expedition when startled by its weird cry. Now, however, he took another swallow of the brandy, clinched his teeth, and, revolver in hand, stole down the gully brave as ever.

But scarcely had he gone ten paces when he paused, whirled in his tracks, and rushed back to his horse. Then mounting, he guided the animal toward the open plain.

A brilliant plan had suddenly flashed into his mind. It was one that promised to pave the way—to give him time, if not to clear him from all connection with the crimes he had committed. He cursed himself for a fool for not having thought of it before.

Taking a comb from his pocket, he arranged his hair as well as he could, and made the best he could of his clothing. He then rode directly toward Moore Ranch.

What did the villain mean by this?

Had he really become insane?

Far from it; for the brandy had quickened his perceptions, and shown him the best way out of his difficulties. His place at that time, as a neighbor, was at Moore Ranch.

He would be missed, for his father, doubtless, warned of the death of Morris Moore, would ride down the river at once. Hank would go to the ranch, pretending not to have heard of the owner's death, and would there explain the absence of Manly Morgan in such a manner as to coincide with the story he had already told to Marion Moore.

He had been requested by her to warn Manly of the presence of another bear; and he would state that he had met the young man, that they had found where the bear had swum the river. They had followed, and met with old Mose, who had been fishing. Hank would state that he had become separated from Manly and Uncle Mose, and finally, becoming discouraged, had given up the search and returned. He would be surprised to hear that Manly had not yet returned.

The villain laughed, in fiendish glee, when he reflected on the advantage he would gain by this story; for Manly, as he knew, had often followed large game, with Mose in his company, when they had been absent for two or three days at a time.

A quarter of an hour later, Hank Howard, after delivering his horse to a negro, strode to the front of the Moore dwelling.

Upon the veranda sat his father, the father of Manly Morgan, and the doctor from San Marcos, who had ridden at full speed to attend Marion Moore, having been called in.

Hank's father sprung from his chair, in pleased surprise, for he was strongly attached to his son notwithstanding the disgrace and trouble which the young man caused him.

Mr. Morgan was also, at once, on his feet.

"Where have you been, Hancock?" asked his father. "Did you know of Mr. Moore's death?"

"What?" exclaimed Hank, in well assumed surprise, tempered with sadness and regret. "Dead? You astonish me. How terrible for Miss Marion! How does she bear it?"

"Poor girl! She was shocked bad enough this morning, in the bottom-timber."

"What do you mean?" inquired his father.

"Have you seen anything of Manly?" interposed Mr. Morgan, with some anxiety.

"Yes; but do be seated, and I will explain. How do you do, Doctor Brown? You were present at the death of our friend, I suppose? Did he suffer much at the last?"

The doctor took the extended hand of Hank, but in no cordial manner, replying:

"Mr. Moore died alone here on the veranda, and during his daughter's absence. As she is too ill to explain, perhaps you can inform us what has happened to her, in addition to the loss of her father. She is more prostrated than this calamity should occasion, considering it has long been expected."

Hank Howard helped himself to a chair.

He had three very eager listeners.

His disordered condition, in attire, manner, and appearance generally, did not strike them as strange or unusual, as indeed it was not; and the semi-darkness took off the rough edges. They knew he had been drinking.

All was quiet within. Mrs. Morgan was watching by the maiden's bedside, having sent the frightened Rosa from the apartment.

The husband of Aunt Dinah, and the old slave of the Morgans, whom he had asked to assist him, were keeping the death-watch.

A few candles were burning.

The moon rolled lazily amid the hazy heavens, giving but feeble light.

It was a dreary night, everything without seeming in perfect keeping with the sad occasion.

In the slaves' quarters there was utter silence.

The men on the veranda had spoken in hushed tones.

CHAPTER XII.

ONLY THE BRANDY.

ALTHOUGH Hank Howard had drank sufficient to have upset him on any other occasion, yet

such was the state of his mind that the liquor had not much effect upon him; that is, it had not incapacitated him from conversation that was to some extent rational.

He therefore told as straight and reasonable a story as he could have done when perfectly sober, and possibly more so; for the liquor, and the prospects he saw ahead of clearing himself, gave him confidence and hope. He was in his heart greatly pleased to know that Marion Moore was seriously ill from the mental strains she had experienced. And, although he loved her as much as his low nature was capable of loving, it was not strange that he was glad to know of her illness, for it would favor his plans.

If seriously unwell, the young girl would not be capable of reasoning in connection with what had occurred in the timber, and therefore she would not urge immediate and thorough search for Manly Morgan. Besides, did she have brain fever, her mind might become weakened, and he could more easily bend her to his will. It looked promising.

Hank cared not how weak the maiden's mind might be, could he but gain her as a willing wife, for he much preferred it so.

Consequently, having been suddenly transported from a most hopeless state of mind to one born of his newly-conceived scheme of operations, he was quite natural in speech, manner, and general behavior. He looked and acted the very opposite of the one who had such a load of guilt upon his soul, and who had so recently shed the blood of his fellow-men.

None would have believed it possible, to see and hear him speak that he had committed two horrible and cowardly murders on that very day.

Hank stated that he had left home with no particular object; in fact, that he had allowed his horse its own will. Finding himself, after a fit of musing, in the cool bottom-timber, he had permitted his horse to continue in the down-river path until he reached the vicinity of Moore Ranch. He had then, he said, secured the animal in a thicket, and wandered toward the river, following a gully, and quite unexpectedly coming upon old Mose, who was fishing in a cove of the river.

The old negro had hooked a huge catfish, and he endeavored to help him land it, both having quite a struggle with the fish, and finally losing it off the hook.

Here Hank prided himself on having made a fine point, as this would account for his trail, should it be found.

He went on to state that he had left Uncle Mose fishing, and set out to return to his horse, when an immense bear sprung across the gully, and over his head, startling him terribly. He climbed a tree, after running a distance, for he had no rifle, and knew he was no match for him with knife and revolver.

He could not tell how long he remained, but at length he descended and ran through the thickets to warn old Mose. While thus running he heard a yell of fright. He was much startled, and dropped his bowie and flask. Eventually he sought flight on his horse. Soon, however, he controlled himself, and returning, found Miss Marion, who was riding the horse of Manly Morgan. She was, so Hank went on to say, much agitated, and pale as death.

The villain then related the story told him by Marion in regard to her having been saved by Manly from death, and also the killing of the bear by young Morgan. He said, also, that she insisted upon going home at once, as her pony had run away, and she feared that her father, seeing the animal return without her, would think she had met with an accident.

Hank now inferred that this had been but too true, and that the consequences had been serious to Mr. Moore. He then asserted that he had returned to the scene of the bear-fight to look for Manly, for he began to think there must have been two bears in the timber. He had been requested by the young lady to warn her preserver that there was yet danger.

He found the young man, reported to him all he knew, and then, meeting Uncle Mose, they discovered evidence that some beast had crossed the river. They had sought a place that was shallow, waded over, and then separated to search for "sign" of the bear. All proceeding down-stream, it chanced that he, Hank, came upon the tracks of a band of horsemen, whom he believed to be outlaws. He saw their camp, what had not been long deserted, and he thought it prudent to return, expecting to find that Manly and Mose had done so also.

But he now believed they must have struck the trail of the bear, and were following it down the river; and this, as bandits were in the vicinity, was a dangerous proceeding.

Hank had, in reality, found the old camp, some days previous; and he knew not, when telling his story, that he had there made the best point in his favor he had throughout.

His audience had, all three, listened most intently, and with the utmost interest.

"There," burst out Dr. Brown, with an air of professional pride; "did I not tell you there had been other matters to cause Miss Marion's condition besides the death of her father?"

"You did, indeed," said Mr. Morgan; "but I am astonished that a bear should be so near the ranch. Was my son injured?"

"He was scratched somewhat," replied Hank, "but was not very seriously hurt."

"Then you think there have been outlaws camped over the river?" put in the father of Hank, inquiringly; "and that they have gone down-stream? I hope you are mistaken."

"I hope so too. I fear otherwise, however. Had they been neighboring rancheros, they would, I fancy, have given us a call."

"So they would, my son. We are known to be hospitable. We must investigate this matter."

"It is not just the right time for that," said Hank. "We must not forget the fact that poor Mr. Moore is dead. Did any one in San Marcos know it, except yourself, doctor?"

"I spoke of it to several before I left," was the reply, "and it must be generally known by this time. All proceedings must be quiet, however, unless Miss Moore improves more rapidly than I now anticipate. Her case is more serious than you gentlemen perhaps realize."

"Not really dangerous?" asked Hank quickly.

"Time will tell. She must not be further shocked, or even excited. In that case, I would not answer for her life."

Hank Howard was, by this time, greatly excited.

What if Marion should recover sufficiently to ask for Manly, and should be told that the young man had not been seen since his encounter with the bear? Would not this set her on a train of thought and reasoning, which would end in her belief that he, Hank, was responsible for her lover's absence?

Might it not even shock her, even to death, and be her murderer as much as he was the slayer of Manly and old Mose?

Was he to lose her, after all he had risked?

That would be fearful retribution indeed.

However, matters had thus far progressed in so favorable a manner for him, that the miscreant had good reason to hope for a continuance of good luck, as he termed it.

All now sat smoking in silence. All were unconcerned in regard to the absence of young Morgan, except his father; and, even he did not feel any great anxiety, and would not for some time.

Finally the physician remarked that he had heard a report in San Marcos, that Manly and Miss Moore were affianced lovers.

"That can't be," said Mr. Morgan; "for my son has no secrets from me and his mother. I only wish it was true. Poor girl! She has the sympathy of all in her bereavement."

Hank, throughout his entire narrative had borne himself quite creditably; but it had required all his will power to keep him on the straight trail, and not make a slip or leave an opening for room to doubt.

He was extremely relieved when he had ended.

For once, he thought that the boot of the owl had not militated against his luck.

He had made a good piece of it, and now, to still further aid him, he saw a black cloud slowly rising, indicating that a rain storm was likely soon to wash out every tell-tale trace of his presence in the bottom-timber.

Having finished his story, Hank took little part in the conversation that followed; as he had entirely too much on his mind. Besides this, he wanted more brandy; for he had begun to feel faint, and had some strange imaginings.

As his brandy bottle was in his saddle-pocket at the corral he stepped from the veranda, and strode slowly in that direction. He swallowed a liberal potion, and set out leisurely on his return; noticing that it had become much darker, and the black cloud had risen higher toward the zenith.

Hank decided that it would bring rain by midnight.

Then he suddenly stopped. A dread thought flashed upon his mind. The wretch began to tremble.

He had heard that thunder would cause corpses to rise from the bottom of bodies of water!

The Rio San Marcos was not deep. The probability was, that the proofs of his hideous crimes would now be brought to notice, and the thought caused the villain to almost lose his breath. The storm, he had so wished for, he now wished a thousand miles from him.

Hank walked on presently, and up the steps, just opposite the main entrance to the dwelling, the doors of which were wide open. But, no sooner had he planted his feet on the veranda, than he halted on the instant; for, straight toward him, robed in her spotless night attire, came none other than the hapless Marion Moore!

Her eyes blazed with an unnatural light, and her right arm was extended toward him; a finger pointing accusingly, while her gaze seemed to burn into his very soul.

He could not move a muscle.

He strove to speak, but could utter no sound.

Straight over the threshold, the maiden walked, before the trio of men in their chairs perceived her. They were too dumfounded to move.

Then, in a pitiful voice, she chanted:

"My love sleeps to-night in a watery grave!"

With a yell of mortal terror, Hank Howard fell senseless upon the veranda!

Mr. Morgan and the doctor rushed to the side of the poor girl, and bore her to her chamber. There they found Mrs. Morgan, fast asleep. The old lady awoke, however, on their entrance, and was filled with self-condemnation at having given way to slumber.

Marion, passive as a little child, was put to bed again, and a soothing draught administered.

Mr. Howard had sprung at once toward his son, and, lifting him, placed him in a chair. There he supported his head, until Dr. Brown and Mr. Morgan returned.

"I did not suppose the young gentleman was so easily alarmed," said the doctor. "He must have believed Miss Marion to be a genuine ghost. Is he superstitious, Mr. Howard?"

"Somewhat so," answered the father; "but I never knew him to faint before. He must be unwell. Perhaps he has drank too much of late, and that has begun to tell upon him."

"That's about the size of it, I reckon," agreed the doctor, who knew well the young man's reputation.

"Had we not better have him put to bed?" suggested Mr. Morgan, with some solicitude.

"He'll be all right, presently," said Dr. Brown. "Here he is now, coming back to Texas!"

And Hank did regain his senses in a measure, and that on the jump, so to speak; for, when a vial of hartshorn was held to his nostrils, he sprung wildly upward, nearly upsetting both his father and Mr. Morgan. His arms wildly beat the air, and his eyes had an insane glare in their depths, as he cried:

"Off, all of you! I'll go no further, Uncle Mose, so help me God, if they'll let me alone!"

He stopped. He recollects suddenly where he was, and the necessity for prudence. Hank was cunning and adroit even then.

"Run, Mauly! Run, Mose!" he called out; "for the bear will have you! Great God! the beast has killed Miss Marion!"

He knew perfectly well what he was saying now, though the listeners believed he did not.

His old father was worried and anxious.

"Never mind him, Mr. Howard," said the physician, "It's only a little too much brandy, and not enough sleep. Sit down, Hancock, and compose yourself! It's all right. The bear is dead, and Miss Moore is safe, and asleep. Here, swallow this!"

Before Hank could realize what the doctor was up to, the latter had a dose into his mouth, that was intended to quiet his nerves, and induce somnolence speedily.

Half an hour later, the wretched assassin lay on a lounge, in a death-like slumber, while one of the innocent victims did really "sleep in a watery grave," and the other was being carried away, through the night, from home, and parents, and betrothed wife—all dearer to him than life itself—bound upon a horse's back, and in the power of outlaws!

Thus the case stood.

Such was life then, but too frequently, on the frontiers.

Such, in substance, though in various forms, is life in the abstract, everywhere!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FROWN OF DEATH.

THE friends all remained at Moore Ranch during the night, their presence being required.

Marion, who, in the delirium of fever, had left her bed, and so terrified Hank Howard, slept under the influence of opiates; and was in that condition when the doctor paid her his early-morning visit. Aunt Dinah had been called at midnight to sit by the poor girl's bedside, thus giving Mrs. Morgan an opportunity to rest.

Dr. Brown, previous to his leaving San Marcos, had taken the liberty of ordering a coffin to be sent to Moore Ranch, as he was the family physician, and knew that there was no one on the place to take charge of affairs on this saddest of occasions.

The two rancheros and the doctor had taken turns sitting up after midnight, and now all three held a conference in the early morning, which decided each of them as to his duties during the day. Mr. Morgan superintended the digging of the grave, beneath a giant oak on the margin of the timber, where poor Morris Moore had oft expressed a wish to have his remains laid.

Mr. Howard was to ride to San Marcos, and report at the ranches, and in the town, the dangerous illness of Miss Moore; and also state that the doctor considered it absolutely necessary that the funeral be a quiet affair, with none present except the nearest neighbors, and the slaves belonging to the estate; as any unusual commotion or excitement might be fatal to the young lady.

There was no little anxiety in regard to the absence of Manly Morgan and old Mose, especially when some rancheros reported having come upon a trail which had evidently been made by a gang of horse-thieves, and which led

from down the river, on the north side, past the town of San Marcos, southwesterly.

This report Mr. Howard brought to Moore Ranch on his return, and the Morgans became still more apprehensive on account of their son's prolonged absence. Indeed, it was much to be regretted that he should be absent at such a time, although the young man was, of course, ignorant of the fact that Marion's father was dead.

The report in regard to the presence of outlaws in the neighborhood did not, of itself, explain the absence of Manly and the old negro; for the bandits would, it was argued, only jeopardize their own safety, arousing the people to pursue them to their stronghold, and besides could gain little or nothing by capturing them. It was possible that Manly and Uncle Mose, however, had run into the camp of the outlaws, that a fight had ensued, and both been slain.

The reported presence of the band agreed with the statement of Howard, for it was believed they must be the same whose camp Hank claimed to have discovered; and it was determined that an organized party should start in search of them on the morning following the funeral. This was to take place in the afternoon, the weather being warm.

The casket arrived in the morning, and preparations were at once quietly made.

Howard slept on until the middle of the forenoon, for the doctor had given him a powerful opiate, and his room had been kept darkened. When he did awaken he was on the borders of *delirium tremens*; weak and trembling in every nerve, and craving insanely the stimulant that he knew was his only hope. Yet he recalled the last, and to him most terrible scene, which he had witnessed the night previous—Marion Moore, as if she had died, and arisen from her grave to accuse him, by glance and gesture, of the murder of Manly Morgan!

That weird strain of hers—what did it imply?

Her words must have meant that she, in some mysterious manner, knew what he had done; and not only that, but that she and Manly were affianced. Could she really know of his rival's death, and the cause?

Had that been the means of wrecking her mind, for mad she most assuredly was?

Or, was it merely the maiden's shrewd suspicion when she saw him in the timber, which now, in her insane fancy, seemed real?

Hank was utterly unfit to reason on the subject, for his state of mind would not permit any particular line of thought; besides, the longer he dwelt on the matter, the more demoralized he became mentally, and the more apprehensive as to his personal safety.

But, he must brave all; and more than that, he must now procure some brandy, or he would go mad. He could scarce control himself.

He found that, in spite of his endeavors, by all the strength of his will, in his enfeebled condition, he could not dispel a presentiment of coming evil to himself. This, he believed, could only be in connection with the crimes he had committed on the previous day.

Hank feared to encounter even his own father, for he felt positive he would betray guilt; and in the daylight, which he now dreaded, his wretched appearance would be more noticeable.

He made up his mind that he would regain his brandy bottle; but he gave a start and a groan as he thought of the possibility of Mr. Morgan's having discovered it. Indeed, search might be made of his equipments for the purpose of depriving him of liquor; for they knew that he had indulged too freely the previous day. Mr. Morgan would know that the bottle had been taken from his cellar, for the label was written in the old ranchero's own hand, he having bottled the liquor.

It did seem that the most trivial thing might destroy him, and render his story unreasonable and fasten suspicion upon him.

The villain became more and more worried.

He at length staggered to the window.

The sun was high in the heavens, and this astonished him. He could not determine whether the shutters had been closed when he arrived at the ranch or not; but it appeared that the room had been purposely darkened.

Hank was always suspicious of everything and everybody. He could not decide as to the impression his fainting had made on the spectators and also the wild words he had uttered; consequently, he was greatly in fear that the doctor, at least, distrusted him.

This was natural in the guilty man's condition.

But, if Dr. Brown was suspicious, why had he contrived to keep him asleep so long?

Why, indeed?

Hank gave a cry of anger and dismay.

The thought burst upon him that this had been done to give them time to search the bottom-timber for proofs of his story.

No sooner was this impression upon his brain, than he tore open the shutter in desperation. He found that the window was covered with vines. Peeping through, he could see no one near the dwelling. He then climbed out the window and stole like a thief to the corrals; when, to his relief, he found his bottle still safe.

Gluing the nozzle to his lips, he drank copiously.

Still, it might have been seen by Mr. Morgan.

Was he to be thus tortured forever?

If so, Hank preferred death to life.

By the way, where were the people who should be around the ranch? He was convinced they must be, even now, searching the timber.

If so, he was lost!

Nothing but fight was now open to him.

Presently, however, the wretch was relieved, on perceiving Mr. Morgan standing beneath a huge oak, and two slaves digging near him. They were evidently preparing the grave of their old master.

But, where were Hank's father and the doctor?

He resolved to ascertain of Mr. Morgan, as soon as his nerves should become stronger.

In a few minutes, he repaired to the oak.

"Good-morning!" said the ranchero, pleasantly. "How do you feel now, Hancock? You were quite ill last night. I hope you are better."

"I feel stronger, thank you, Mr. Morgan," returned Hank; "but have you heard how Miss Moore is? I never was so frightened in my life before. It seemed to me that she was about to fall dead at my feet!"

"Miss Marion is still sleeping, I think. She is in a dangerous condition—so Doctor Brown says. The funeral of her poor father is to be this afternoon, and as quick as possible."

"Where is my father, have you any idea?"

"He left for his home, just a few minutes ago. He has been to San Marcos this morning. The doctor and my wife are in the house. Had you not better see the cook, and have her get you some breakfast? You look pale and weak."

A great load was removed from Hank's mind.

He made no reply, and Mr. Morgan continued:

"They report a band of outlaws passing San Marcos last night, and we think they must be the same whose camp you discovered. Neither my son nor old Mose has returned, but it doesn't seem reasonable to suppose that the bandits would molest them."

"Manly not back?" returned Hank, in well-sighed astonishment. "Why, what can have happened?"

"Hard to tell," said the old gentleman, "but we intend to organize a searching-party tomorrow morning. We were obliged to wait until after our poor friend's funeral you know."

"Yes, to be sure," Hank faltered. "Well, I think I'll go and get a cup of coffee."

He turned toward the house as he spoke.

"The best thing for you, Hank. Do so."

There was not a more relieved man in all Texas, than Hank Howard.

He again began to believe that Satan was favoring him in a most unexpected manner.

He had fabricated that statement about the outlaw trail, but it was true after all.

All right. He would do all he could to encourage the idea that Manly and Mose had been either shot or captured by the bandits. It was the only way in which he could account for the absence of the young man and his slave.

Hank was now more confident than he had ever been, that he would pull through.

The whole matter, he decided, hung upon finding his knife and flask; for he did not intend trusting entirely to the story he had told. The least thing might yet ruin him, and the way in which matters were now running was so favorable to him that he resolved to clear everything from his path that he could.

He might—yes, he would—win the game.

The storm, he had seen approaching, had really come during the night; but, he bad slept so soundly, he could not tell whether it bad been accompanied with thunder. He would question the doctor in regard to it.

Hank went direct to the veranda, and, before he stepped upon the same, Dr. Brown appeared at the hall door, and accosted him in such a tone and manner that he was still further relieved. The doctor was smiling.

"Well, young man," he said; "you're up at last, I see. You ought to be well rested by this time, for you had a long sleep."

"Thanks to you for that, doctor! I have been awful nervous of late, and all that excitement yesterday was too much for me. But I do hope Miss Moore is not going to be seriously ill?"

"She has a high fever this morning, but we must hope for the best. It is to be regretted that she can't see her poor father once more. But it is impossible. I would not answer for her life, had she to go through any serious excitement now. She must not even be informed of this unaccountable absence of Manly Morgan."

"They have been attached friends, and since he saved her life she must regard him more highly. But I am detaining you, Hancock."

"Go to the dining-room, and get some coffee. You must take your regular meals, and less stimulants, my boy, or you'll regret it. Your father will soon be back."

Dr. Brown turned, and with hasty steps went into the hall, and up the stairway.

Hank seated himself. Breakfast was the last thing he cared to think of just then. Indeed, his stomach was in such a state that he became sick at the thoughts of food.

Soon his father returned from his ranch, and then dinner was announced. Hank excused himself. He returned, instead, to his brandy bottle. Then he sauntered to the edge of the timber. His intention was, to search for his lost flask and bowie, as soon as it was dark. If he found them he was safe!

Dinner was ended, and the clergyman who was to officiate arrived from San Marcos.

All was soon ready. The slaves, in their Sunday clothes, formed a sad procession.

The services were simple, and were soon over. Mrs. Morgan remained at Marion's bedside.

Soon the mortal remains of Morris Moore were hidden from human sight forever.

The negroes returned to their quarters.

Supper was prepared at an earlier hour than usual, and the few friends who had remained, after partaking, enjoyed their cigars on the veranda. The clergyman had gone, and Mr. Howard had accompanied him as far as the ranch of the latter.

Mr. Morgan and his wife decided to remain, as did the doctor; but Hank, as soon as it was dark, excused himself, saying he would try and get some of his young friends to join in the search for Manly and Uncle Mose, on the following day.

Bidding all good-night, this accomplished scoundrel rode toward the river shades, the regaining of his knife and flask uppermost in his mind.

CHAPTER XIV.

PETE ON THE PATROL.

PAINT PETE made the best speed possible, on his return to the Rio San Marcos; but he gave the town a wide berth, and kept far from the up-trail of his party, in order not to betray any connection with them, for strict prudence required this.

He believed he could obtain all the information he desired at one of the three ranches, which he knew to be across the river from the point at which he and his pards had encamped, and where he had rescued the young ranchero from death. Consequently, Pete did not draw rein until he was within a mile of the camp and the scene of the assassinations.

As it happened, he was directly across the San Marcos from Howard Ranch; and, securing his horse—giving the animal ample slack rope to enable it to graze—he rested, and broke his fast. The outlaw made a camp-fire, and took no precautions to prevent discovery. In fact, he decided that he would pass himself off for a ranchero from the Rio Colorado, in search of some horses that had been stolen from him.

After taking a smoke he crossed the river, and staked his horse to fresh grass; then making his way through the timber, to the open plain. He soon discovered that he was quite near a ranch, and at once decided to call boldly there, and ascertain if there was any available news to be had for the asking. As it chanced, it was just at the time that Mr. Howard returned from Moore Ranch to his own.

His horse, fully equipped, was standing where he had been tied to a veranda post.

Paint Pete stepped up, and the old ranchero, coming out, met him. He welcomed the stranger cordially, as was his custom, and inquired if his horse was at hand. He said that a negro would care for the animal, and also suggested that he would have refreshments ordered.

Pete thanked him for his hospitality, but explained that he had just eaten, and had staked his horse to graze near at hand. He then introduced himself as Tom Jennings of the Colorado, and stated the object of his mission on the San Marcos.

The two seated themselves, Mr. Howard offering a cigar, and presently asking:

"Have you met a young man and an old negro in company, on your travels? The former is quite handsome, well built, and with long, light-brown hair. The darky is quite aged and gray."

Paint Pete was deeply interested at once.

He knew he had struck business.

"Iain't met no sich pilgrims, Mr. Howard. Fack air, I hain't see'd nobody since I struck 'cross from ther Col'rado. Why? Hes they turned up missin', an' who air they?"

"It is young Morgan—Manly Morgan—the son of my next neighbor, and a slave of theirs—Mose by name. They have both disappeared. They were last seen by my son, a mile below here, after young Morgan had killed an immense bear, which had attacked the daughter of a Mr. Moore, who owns—or did own—the second ranch from mine.

"Strange and sad to say, when Miss Moore returned home, after being rescued by the young man, she found her father dead; but, poor man, we had long expected his demise. Altogether, with the death of Moore, and the dangerous illness of his daughter from the double shock she had received—this, with the

unaccountable disappearance of young Morgan and the slave, has produced considerable excitement in the neighborhood.

"The funeral of Mr. Moore takes place this afternoon, and early to-morrow a considerable party will set out in search of Manly and old Morse. My son, who was last in company with the missing man, states that he saw the trail of a party of men, whom he thinks to be horse-thieves; and he advances the idea that these outlaws may have captured the missing men, or that they may have ridden into the bandits' camp, and been killed. In that case the villains would, of course, secrete the bodies.

"These outlaws passed San Marcos last night, going toward the northwest. It does not seem reasonable that they would shoot men, and thus draw down upon them the vengeance of our community. What do you think of it, Mr. Jennings?"

"By hokey, Mr. Howard, things seems to be mixed 'roun' hyer, and trouble rainin' down on yer thick, all in a heap! I didn't think I'd strike ther trail of no sich party, an' so hit 'pears I missed it. Shouldn't wonder if they war ther hallyuns what tuck my critters—dad gum them!"

"But 'bout ther young feller an' ther nigger—hit don't 'pear like they hes bin shot er tuck. More'n likely they struck ther b'ar trail, an' follered ther varmint down kentry. War young Morgan well-fixed?"

"His father is quite wealthy, and will offer a reward if they don't turn up to-morrow."

Paint Pete congratulated himself, believing he would have the laugh on his pards, and gain their respect for his adroitness. He was confident that the young man spoken of by the ranchero, was the same whom he had left captive in the stronghold of the band.

"Then I hain't no doubt he'll be foun', fer ef ther gang scooped him in, hit war ter git a reward out'n his dad; an' I'm inclernated ter cpine they known him, some on 'em. That's 'bout bit, I reckon."

"Ther cusses snatched him, an' ther nigger too. But whar's ther man what se'd 'em last? He orter be on hand fer ter fin' ther trailers p'ints on ther start."

"He is my son, and is now at Moore Ranch, where he will remain until after the funeral, which takes place this afternoon."

Pete came very near asking if they intended having a funeral with the "dead nigger;" but checked himself in time, remembering that it was a ranchero who was dead, and that the negro's corpse had not been found. Mr. Howard resumed:

"I have not seen my son this morning, for he was unwell last night, and the doctor gave him a sleeping potion. I hope he will be better when he awakes. He is of a very nervous temperament, and I am afraid, drinks too much sometimes."

"Last night, Miss Moore walked out from her bed-chamber, while delirious, and nearly frightened the poor fellow to death. In fact, he fainted. I had noticed that he appeared strange last evening, when he came in from the timber. He was very pale and actually wild-looking."

Paint Pete was, by this time, fully persuaded that he was sitting and conversing with the father of the most cowardly villain living; for he was satisfied that the swarthy scoundrel, who had murdered the old negro, and attempted the same with the young white man, was Hancock Howard the son of his host!

But he believed the father to be as true and honest as the son was vile and depraved.

Pete had a fellow feeling for all who were under the ban of the law; but he was far from putting himself in the same catalogue with such a dastard as Hank Howard—although he would have leaned toward Hank's side had there been as much money there as on the other, but this he did not think likely to be the case.

This bandit believed he had a "soft snap"—that he would make quite a sum from that plunge of his into the river. He had now learned all that he wished to know, except in regard to the wealth of his entertainer; but this he knew it would be impossible to find out from the man himself, without being guilty of great rudeness, and arousing suspicion.

If the other side should fail him, he had "dead wood," as he termed it, on the Howard side; for this old gentleman would, undoubtedly, give all he was worth to suppress the truth of his son's murderous deeds, and prevent their becoming known to the world and justice.

Although invited to remain, and make himself comfortable, "Tom Jennings from the Col'rado" thanked his host, asserting that he intended to cross the country, and look up the trail of the outlaws; promising to report, if he did not meet the searching party the next day. He then returned to his horse, and Mr. Howard went back to Moore Ranch, to attend the funeral.

He made no mention of the visitor he had had, indeed he did not think of the self-styled Mr. Jennings until he found himself once more at home. Then he began to wish that either his son or the stranger was with him; for he felt lonesome, and had strange forebodings of some ill-defined evil to him or his, which he could

neither understand nor account for. It was the beginning of the end.

Paint Pete was cunning in many ways although he could not even write his own name.

He had seen much crime in his day, and had associated a great deal with criminals.

He was, therefore, well posted in regard to the effect the commission of murder would have on the mental nature of the murderer himself, especially if the latter was a coward, as he knew Hank must be.

His belief was, that the latter could not resist, even at the risk of life itself, returning to the scene of his crime that very night; for it seemed he had been prevented doing so, the previous one, by the narcotic that had been given him.

The statement of Mr. Howard, respecting the discovery of the trail of himself and pards, gave Pete much apprehension; for he knew he would have no chance for life whatever, should the band be discovered, and his connection with the capture of young Morgan be made known. That would never do.

His one anxiety, however, was to know which side would pay the most—the Howard or the Morgan—and he resolved to "lay" for Hank that night, at the cove; having little doubt that he could capture the assassin, and find out how much he would give to be allowed to go ahead, and "work his racket," having young Morgan kept a captive, that is, remaining as one dead.

Pete knew that Hank must have some strong private motive for acting as he had done; and, from the mention of the fair daughter of the ranchero who had so recently died, which had been made by the elder Howard, he began to think he could see what it was. Yet he was not so sure, when he reflected that young Howard had first murdered the negro, and that Morgan had found the body, and the bowie as well—evidence against the assassin—and this would perhaps be sufficient cause for Hank to have made the attempt a second time, to cover his former crime.

Yet, as he had decided that there was a woman in the case, he felt it must be the one who had been saved from the bear by young Morgan. Hank Howard had probably made up his mind to win this girl, and had killed the negro in revenge for his having informed her of some of the young man's disgraceful doings—of which there was, doubtless, no scarcity—and then, when the villain found that his suit had been ruined by Morgan's getting the inside track of him, he had made up his mind to slay his rival. When he found that his yell of terror, at the reappearance of his victim above the water, had drawn young Morgan to the spot, he decided to act.

Thus young Howard had a double motive: first to prevent the murder of the old slave from being laid at his door, and then to remove forever his rival from his path.

Along with this, it struck Paint Pete that such a man as this Hank Howard evidently was, could not be capable of loving any one but himself to any great extent; therefore his object in winning the girl must have been to secure her fortune, her father being at the point of death. That event, when it occurred, would leave him clear ground.

Having settled these matters in his mind, to his own satisfaction, Pete set about the beginning of his own scheme.

He recalled the fact that Hank was said to be ill and nervous, and this he did not wonder at. It was by no means strange. The villain had been greatly frightened at the appearance of the old negro in the spasms of death, rising above the waters of the cove; as a matter of course, if Hank visited the gully the coming night, Pete reasoned that he had the assassin foul. He considered it a very happy thought of his, to have placed the body of the slave where he did.

The outlaw was resolved that he would make the dead negro serve him that night.

Having arranged matters in his mind, the plotting Pete mounted his horse, and proceeded down the path toward the gully, and thence to the scene of the murder.

When he reached the vicinity of the gully, he again secreted his horse, and then made his way on foot to the river-bank.

He saw at a glance that the body of poor old Mose had not been molested.

Paint Pete removed the knife, and, wrapping the weapon in a soiled handkerchief, placed it in his pocket; for he began to perceive that, if necessary, it would be valuable as evidence.

It was now nearly dark, and was fast growing more so.

Pete calmly seated himself near the corpse, and patiently waited for developments, refreshing himself from time to time, from a flask of whisky.

Outlaw though he was, in most things he was a complete contrast to Hancock Howard. Pete was a villain, it was true, but not a cowardly one.

There was no nonsense about Paint Pete. He was no more moved by the presence of the dead, than if old Mose had been a log of wood.

And there we leave him.

CHAPTER XV.

BELLA SENORITA.

POOR Marion Moore, after recovering partially from the effects of the opiate, which was about the time that the funeral was taking place, lay in a listless state, realizing nothing of the near past.

At least, as far as the death of her father was concerned, this was so, for her brain was filled with the most extravagant pictures, passing in panoramic array, and the central figure in each was Manly Morgan.

Thus she lay, entirely occupied in such mental contemplation, and seemingly unconscious of all that was passing around her; Mrs. Morgan being most attentive throughout, but her words and deeds of kindness unnoticed by their recipient. The mother of Manly had heard the name of her son whispered by Marion in her delirium, and she felt in her heart that there had been some understanding between the pair on the previous day. On this account she redoubled her attentions, loving the poor bereaved maiden more than ever.

The continued absence of her son, so strange and inexplicable, worried the good lady considerably; but she could not bring herself to believe that he had come to harm.

He would, she felt confident, return on the morrow; and yet, it would be to suffer great sorrow on Marion's account. He, her brave and noble boy, had saved Marion from a fearful death, and he deserved all the love and gratitude which the fond mother believed would be his unchangeably.

Thus affairs remained in the sick-room, with the exception of the visits of the physician at times; Marion, all through the afternoon, manifesting no interest in her surroundings, and taking her medicine passively like a child. She did not even mention her father's name, as Mrs. Morgan was constantly dreading to hear her do.

Dr. Brown, considering that his patient was progressing favorably, lay down soon after dark; for his sleep had been brief the night before. But he gave directions to the Morgans that he was to be called if they saw any change in Marion.

Mr. Morgan decided to doze in his chair, relying upon his wife to arouse him, should his services be needed. Aunt Dinah, who was to watch her young mistress half of the time, slumbered in the chamber of the patient; declaring that she would be up, and wide awake in an instant, at the slightest noise. The doctor had, however, given it as his opinion that there was no danger of Miss Marion again leaving her couch; the fever having abated greatly, thus rehiving her brain. Thus all were tranquil.

The night was clear, the sky being studded with stars, and a bright full moon rendered objects discernible quite easily, except in the bottom-timber. Even there, the moon's silvery rays shot down, piercing the few small spaces between the limbs and foliage. Where these sparkles of light did not strike, it was doubly dark, by contrast—dark as Egypt.

Not the faintest zephyr stirred leaf or vine.

Hank Howard repressed his breathing, as his horse bore him within the gloomy shades.

Had he been a few minutes earlier in approaching the timber, he would have had—did he closely scrutinize the margin of the timber—a view, in the bright moonlight, of a beautiful female, but one who was exactly the opposite of Marion Moore.

She was young—apparently not more than eighteen—and was evidently a Mexican, with, it was probable, Saxon blood in her veins.

She was not very dark, not nearly so much so as Hank Howard, but her eyes were filled with jealous and revengeful fury. Her blue-black hair was disheveled, and hung loosely to the back of her mustang.

She was, or had been, quite richly attired; her costume being of the usual showy character affected by her race. A red silk sash was about her waist, in which a long and keen-pointed dagger was thrust.

Her features were regular, and, but for the fierce passions so manifest when she perceived Hank mounting his horse, she might have been deemed lovely. She rode a small and slender-limbed animal, with fiery eyes and sharp-pointed ears; and the equipments were all of Mexican make. The entire outfit was in perfect keeping throughout.

When she discovered that Hank Howard was heading toward the very place where she stood, she turned and slowly entered the shades, as if wishing to avoid being observed by him.

"Gracias a Dios!" burst from her lips. "I have found him, and my knife shall find his black heart."

She halted, and sprung from her saddle with the utmost grace; her movements being, indeed, willowy and serpent-like. Then she glided to a position from which she could watch Honk Howard.

When the latter rode into the timber, and dismounted, the Mexican tigress was not ten paces from him. There she stood, clutching the handle of her stiletto, a very Nemesis in poise, and manner, and every glance.

Yet she betrayed not her presence, nor did

she move a step until Hank stole away from his horse, as he went, with fear and reluctance toward the river. This time, the hoot of an owl would have caused him to stop suddenly in his tracks, and retrace his steps.

The angered beauty seemed satisfied with her observations for the time. She returned to the edge of the timber, and peered from it toward the house from which the young man had emerged. Hesitating but a short time, she stole forward, presenting a most impressive picture.

Jealous rage evidently ruled her still, but not to the same extent as when Hank was visible. She was apparently controlling herself by the greatest effort of which she was capable. On she went, stealing along in the shadow of the corrals.

The negroes had retired early, and this was favorable to the night prowler, who gained the corner of the house, and glanced around it without being discovered. A man was seated on the veranda, quietly smoking a cigar.

With a look of baffled rage, she made her way to the rear entrance of the dwelling.

She looked into each apartment on the ground floor, but all were vacant.

This seemed to greatly surprise her.

Up the stairway she went, thus proving her daring nature; for, had she stepped three paces from it toward the front door, she would have betrayed her presence to Mr. Morgan.

Quickly she gained the head of the stairs, and, with silent steps, advanced to a partly open door, through which streamed a bright light. The strange spy gazed into the room, and saw that it had three occupants—an old negress asleep on the floor, a middle-aged white woman dozing in an easy-chair, and, reclining upon a bed, a fair and angel-like girl, whose eyes, large and strange in expression, were wide open. The intruder was amazed, for the eyes of the maiden were fixed, in a listless stare, directly upon her face; she having imprudently thrust her head forward in the doorway.

Yet the girl on the couch did not appear to be alarmed. The Mexican maiden placed her finger across her lips, by way of caution, and the other beckoned her to approach.

It was a strange proceeding on the part of the stranger, but just as strange and astonishing were the movements of Marion Moore. She had, evidently, not the slightest suspicion of danger to herself; on the contrary, she seemed to be fascinated by the dark eyes of her visitor, and her will to be under the Mexican's control.

She slowly arose, first glancing at Mrs. Morgan, whose eyes were then closed. Marion succeeded in slipping from the bed to the floor, and, without the slightest hesitation, crept toward the door; extending her hand to meet that of the other, though she had never before seen her.

The next moment, the two were in the hall, when the Mexican girl took a long wrap from a hook, and placed it about Marion's form. She then laid her hands upon a pair of slippers, which, she was convinced, must belong to the young lady so strangely in her charge.

She did not, however, place these on the feet of Marion, until the pair had cautiously made their way to the rear door of the dwelling; which was accomplished without the slightest alarm being occasioned. Not a word had, up to that time, passed between them.

The slippers were placed on Marion's feet, she submitting quietly, and manifesting neither concern nor curiosity. When this was done, the Mexican beauty grasped her hand, and the two passed swiftly toward the dark shades. When at the margin of the timber, a halt was made.

The Mexican girl glanced toward the house.

Not a sound indicated that the flight of the maiden had been discovered.

Then, for the first time, the stranger spoke:

"I am Donna Juana Monteiro, of San Antonio. You are Marion Moore. You are right not to be afraid of me. I come to save you from a devil!"

"I am come, also, to take revenge upon him for blighting my young life. His name is Hank Howard. At San Marcos I found out all that I wished to know."

"Your father is dead, and the one who loves you is missing. Do you love Hank Howard?"

The only reply was a shudder. An expression of horror came into poor Marion's eyes.

This was sufficient answer. Juana threw her arms around her, and kissed her.

"Do you love Manly Morgan?" she asked.

The eyes of Marion lighted up at once.

"Poor child! I feared so," half-whispered the senorita. "Your heart will be broken. I dare not tell you all. You are not well now, and you cannot bear such sad news."

"I have sworn revenge on Hank Howard, and it will be sweet revenge to have him see us together. He will know that I have told you all, and that he can never win your hand and heart. But, come, Marion!"

"Come with Juana! I will show you Hank Howard, but he shall harm you not. He is a demon, and his hands are stained with the—"

She hesitated. She had been on the point of saying too much, of telling more than was prudent.

"But you shall ask him yourself—you shall

demand of him what he has done with Manly Morgan!"

The cool air seemed to improve Marion, rendering her mental condition more natural.

With more injunctions as to caution and silence, Juana led the young girl into the timber; seeming to know, by instinct, the paths and clear spaces through the undergrowth.

The form of Marion was completely enveloped in the cloak which Juana had laid hands on, and neither of the maidens could have been seen six paces, unless they stood in the clear moonlight. The Mexican girl took especial pains to avoid this. This was quite accidentally, for Juana Monteiro knew nothing of the locality. It chanced that the two girls came, ere long, upon the scene of Marion's adventure of the previous morning.

Here the trees and foliage were less dense, and many bars of moonlight lit up the weird scene, which was rendered more impressive by the many buzzards that were now perching amid the branches, or flying, with slow and lazy wing, from the carcass of the bear, as the maidens approached it.

Marion recognized the spot. To her it seemed that she was gazing upon the conflict.

She trembled, and made an effort to speak, but Juana placed her hand over the girl's lips.

Then it was that the senorita recalled having heard in San Marcos, when making inquiries in regard to Hank, Manly, and others, the story of the killing of an immense bear, and the rescue from it of Miss Moore by young Morgan. In her excitement since then, she had forgotten this.

She now, therefore, understood the cause of her companion's emotions; and, having learned the facts in connection with the disappearance of Manly Morgan, and that Hank Howard had been the last person who had seen him—which was not long after the fight between Manly and the bear—taking this into consideration, the Mexican girl was at once impressed with the suspicion that they must now be near the scene of young Morgan's death; for Juana firmly believed that Hank had killed his rival. She felt that she knew him too well to have any doubts of this.

The fact that Hank had left his horse, and gone on foot in that direction, was also in favor of her theory.

Perhaps he had made the night trip in that secret manner, in order that he might remove some evidences of his crime.

Juana hurried Marion onward toward the river; for she had from the very first moment that she learned what had happened downstream, in San Marcos, resolved that she would confront Hancock Howard and accuse him of the crime which she believed he had committed. She would do this, and would torture the villain all in her power, before she fulfilled to the letter her vow of revenge. This she had taken over the dead body of her infant—that little one so happily dead, since Hank Howard was its father!

Yes, Juana Monteiro would torture her cowardly betrayer, even to the borders of insanity; and she had planned to have him see her in the company of Marion Moore, that very night, when she first discovered him riding from Moore Ranch.

She had intended that Hank should see them both together, which would make him furious; but she knew he would not dare confront her.

Having thought it over, she at length made up her mind to be governed by events as they occurred.

She now realized that Marion was recovering her mental powers.

Juana had cared little for the welfare of the Texan maiden before meeting with her; but, when she beheld the poor, helpless, and unprotected girl, she conceived a strong liking for her and resolved that no harm should come to Marion if she could prevent it.

The two girls had gone but a short distance beyond where Bruin's carcass lay, food for the ravenous buzzards, when they were not only brought to a halt, but their frames were convulsed with violent shudders.

The most appalling yell of terror rung through the dark shades, coming from the direction of the river!

CHAPTER XVI.

CAN THESE THINGS BE?

HANK HOWARD fortified himself well with brandy, after entering the timber, for, if he ever needed strong nerves, it was then. He was about to visit the spot where he had murdered two fellow beings—sent them before their maker in a moment's time, and without warning!

No wonder was it, that he was wrought up to the highest pitch of excitement.

His black eyes stared glassily toward the river, as if he strove to pierce the shades, yet dreaded to do so. At the slightest unusual sound, he was startled, and trembled with terror. He tried to repress his breath; and the beating of his heart, it seemed to him, might be heard at a distance.

And yet, he questioned, who was there to hear?

Certainly no one, unless the dead might be in the vicinity; and they had lost all sense forever.

Very slow was his progress.

At length he burst into the open space, where lay the slain bear; and the very hair on his head seemed to crawl like tortured worms, as a few coyotes darted from their feast, and several buzzards beat the air with heavy wings. He had not thought himself near the scene of Marion's peril, and now these foul beasts and birds terrified him beyond measure; even causing him to spring back into the dense thicket.

But he felt that he must perform his mission as quickly as was possible.

He had had every reason to thank the Fates, thus far, for everything had gone well; even the serious illness of Marion Moore had been an unmixed blessing to him.

He braced up, basing on rapidly across the open, and darting into the darkness beyond; nearing the place where he had plunged his soul into eternal darkness. And as he realized that he must be near the cove, he moderated his pace; for his marrow became chill in his bones, and yet an uncontrollable fascination drew him on.

He could not keep his gaze from being riveted in the direction of the fatal spot, even as he stepped onward; and, knowing not his exact whereabouts in the darkness, he went directly over the edge of the gully, and fell headlong, crashing through the bushes that almost covered the natural excavation.

Hank gave vent to his mingled terror and anger in a groan and quivered in every nerve as he staggered to his feet, scratched and bruised. He waited until he had regained his breath, and something like an approach to composure; having resort again to his bottle, as he stole forward, along the bed of the gully. The scene ahead was an impressive one—such indeed, as is not often seen, even in that fair Southern land.

The branches arching the San Marcos were far less thick with foliage and vines than was the dense timber, and through these the moon sifted and darted her rays; and, in some places, columns of light shone down, silverying the waters, which, where not so illuminated, were black as ink. On either side of the gully was a close thicket, which also arched the same; and gazing down this natural tube, the river chasm had an unearthly appearance, reminding one of the land of enchantment we read of in fairy tales.

But to Hank Howard, it seemed something far different. He imagined that he saw the heads of both his victims projecting above the margin of the gully's mouth; their hands clutching at the crumbling banks, in their struggles to escape from the depths.

The cowardly wretch came very near rushing madly back to his horse, but he felt that, at all hazards, he must proceed.

He must recover his knife, for it was death to him should it be found at the cove.

As for the brandy flask, he had no hope of regaining that in the darkness; but the bowie would be identified as his, and the blade was stained with the blood of old Mose.

His eyes fairly bulged out from their sockets, and his dark and villainous face was stamped with such a terror as is seldom seen upon human countenance. He craned his neck to see, as soon as was possible, as much of the cove's surface as he could.

To his right was a break in the bushes, where the path Uncle Mose had followed to his death led down into and across the gully.

Between that and the river was a thick clump of bushes. Well he remembered it all!

At length Hank stood upon the spot which the old slave had last trodden on earth, and, as the assassin believed, Manly Morgan also.

He scanned the waters below him, and, could he have beheld his own reflection there he would not have recognized himself. The sight would have made him shrik out in terror.

There was nothing to indicate the recent presence of any one, except the pole which Manly had made use of in his search for the corpse which he believed to have been cast over the bank into the river.

One glance showed that the knife was missing.

The rain, during the past night, had washed every sign of the tragedy away. Yet, there was the pole, which Hank cursed his folly in not having thrown into the stream. But for the rain it might have been a clew.

It did not occur to Hank that he was now making fresh "sign." In his terrible agitation, he did not consider this.

He caught the pole, intending to fling it far out into the stream; but, as he had it poised on a level with his belt, he was seized with a trembling, and dropped it as if it had been a red-hot bar of iron. Then he sprung back, facing the path that led into the gully, as though he had received a shock.

It was no wonder, for the miscreant had heard a groan, as if some one was in mortal agony.

It came from the point to which he now looked with a fixed and unnatural stare.

At the same time, the bushes between the path and the river-bank were agitated perceptibly; yet for the life of him Hank could not

break the awful spell that bound him, and flee, much as he longed to do so.

Then to his horror, out from the thicket, into the path, and over the edge of the washout, glided two huge bare feet and ankles, above which were the rolled up legs of old trowsers. That much Hank saw, and more.

The feet were black!

The bushes rustled still more, and then, the figure moved forward, and to a sitting posture. It was old Mose!

His sightless eyes seemed to burn into the very soul of his murderer.

The corpse was sustained in a very natural position, yet the brand of death was on the old slave's face. It was awful.

Hank Howard could endure no more.

For a moment, however, he was as powerless to move as if transformed to stone. His brain seemed bursting; and, as another heavy groan issued apparently from the lips of the dead, Hank gave utterance to as frightful a yell as mortal ears ever heard.

At the same time he made a superhuman bound up the bed of the gully; but a large stone flew through the bushes, to his heels. Terrified beyond conception, the dastard fell prone upon the ground, where he lay as though he had been stricken suddenly dead.

A low, exultant laugh sounded on the air, and Paint Pete jerked the corpse of old Mose back into the bushes, sprung down into the gully, and strode to the side of the man he had so terrified. The outlaw laid hold of the prostrate Hank, and carried him into the shades; soon reaching the clear space where lay the carcass of the bear, and from which Marion and Juana had just departed.

Pete placed Hank's senseless form against the trunk of a tree, and a rope which he had about his waist—one brought for the purpose—he secured the villain in such a manner as to render escape impossible. This done, he sat down to rest; for, carrying such a heavy burden had fatigued him.

The cunning scamp congratulated himself upon having thus far "worked the racket" to his entire satisfaction, as previously planned.

He laughed, and much more loudly than he would have done had he deemed it possible that there was any one, except himself and captive, in the bottom-timber. But that laugh was heard by Juana Monteiro, who, with Marion Moore, had just reached the point in the path from which Paint Pete had, a few minutes before, drawn away the body of poor old Mose.

The two females stood, gazing into the gully.

The keen eyes of Juana noticed the pole, and fresh footprints in the soft mud.

She also saw where Pete had dashed down the bank, where both his boots were deeply imbedded. The yell, she felt sure had come from that very spot; and, from the "sign," there had been two men there.

Hank Howard must have met some one whom he had not expected to meet, and had been greatly startled; while the laugh indicated that he had been outwitted in endeavoring to escape, as did also the fact that the cry of terror had not been repeated. Juana had traveled much in the wilds with her father's wagon-trains, and could read pretty well the "sign" of a trail. Therefore she was not much mystified.

She believed that some strange incident had occurred at the mouth of the gully when Hank had been so frightened; for she did not imagine for a moment that the yell had proceeded from any one else. Her suspicions caused her to gaze keenly about her, and she soon perceived the form of a man lying within a clump of bushes.

A second glance convinced her that the man was dead, and also that he was a negro.

Then she believed she had got at the start of the trail, which would lead to the truth in connection with the disappearance of Marion's lover; for an old slave had vanished at the same time, and the corpse must be that of the missing negro.

That would account for this secret visit of Hank Howard to the cave. He had come to cast his victim into the river, and, with a weight fastened to the body, keep it at the bottom.

Had he flung young Morgan's corpse in first, and been discovered in the act?

Who was it that had confronted Hank?

Some one there had been, and yet she had not observed any one following him.

Juana would not have Marion look on that ghastly sight in the bushes for worlds; so she drew the maiden back on the trail, keeping between her and the thicket. She decided that the man, who had laughed so loudly, was not suspicious of the presence of any other than himself in the timber; and, therefore, they could steal upon him unawares.

She knew, too, that the man must be in the vicinity of the scene of the bear fight.

So she led Marion, who seemed to improve, and take more notice of her surroundings each moment, on the back trail. She was confident that this night walk would not injure the maiden, or she would never have led her so far into the timber. Having gone so far, too, she must see it to the end.

Slowly the two girls proceeded, in order not

to disturb the twigs and bushes through which they passed, and thus betray their presence.

In a few minutes they reached the side of the little open which was toward the river; where the carcass still lay, with the buzzards fluttering overhead. There they paused.

Juana held Marion back within the line of bordering undergrowth, and the pair peeped through the branches. It was a strange sight that met their gaze, and yet the Mexican girl was not greatly surprised.

Juana Monteiro had not been far astray in her conjectures.

There sat a man, a stranger, on the ground opposite; and, near him, secured to a tree, was another.

The first had the appearance of a bandit, and his captive seemed to be senseless.

CHAPTER XVII.

A COMPACT.

JUANA MONTEIRO knew at once that the unconscious man, bound to the tree, was Hank Howard. As to the one who had captured him, she had not the remotest idea, or what could be his object.

She was angry with this man, however, for stealing from her the slightest portion of her revenge, as matters indicated he was about to do. Juana could not see the face of Paint Pete, as he sat with his back toward her.

The outlaw was roughly dressed.

The Mexican looked into the face of her companion, but saw nothing there except a faint expression of wonder and surprise. There was not a trace of recognition. This, however, was not strange, as Marion could not have known who the captured man was.

Pete retained his position only a short time after the two girls arrived. He evidently felt that he was in danger of having visitors, for that unearthly yell might have been heard at Moore Ranch. He arose and held his flask to the lips of Hank Howard, pressing one hand against the forehead of the senseless man, keeping his head back that he might be able to pour the liquor into his mouth.

He then dashed some of the whisky over the captive's face and forehead.

No sooner had he done this than Marion Moore got a clear view of the face of Hank, and it was plain that she recognized him.

Probably the same surroundings brought faintly to her mind the peril through which she had there passed, and the terrific fight Manly had gone through on her behalf with the savage beast; and also that, since that time, she had not seen her lover, and had, in spite of herself, connected young Howard with the absence of Manly Morgan.

Such thoughts must have been Marion Moore's, to the exclusion of any memory in connection with the death of her father, for she started on the instant from the thicket, leaving her mantle in the grasp of Juana, the latter so dumfounded that she was chained to the spot.

When the Mexican girl was, at length, equal to the occasion, she felt it was the more prudent course to remain concealed.

Noiselessly poor Marion, now in spotless white, glided toward the two men.

Paint Pete heard a rustle of garments—a ghost-like rustle, and especially so in that gloomy place. He turned quickly around.

One glance was enough. It was enough even for that iron-nerved outlaw, for he was positive, although he had never believed in ghosts, that a real, genuine visitant from the other world was advancing toward him.

He was so startled and amazed, that he could not give vent to the yell that died in a gurgle in his throat, as he shot headlong into the dense undergrowth, far beyond the tree to which his captive was bound.

The head of Hank fell forward, as Pete released his hold; but a low groan testified that the wretch was recovering his senses.

Marion Moore paused in front of him, and stood silent; her profusion of golden hair hanging free, far down over her white-draped form. Her face was worn and pallid, and it was no wonder that the bandit had thought her a spirit.

Even as he halted, ashamed of his weakness, and looked back upon the scene, he must have felt that any man was excusable in believing in ghosts, who saw such an apparition; though what harm Pete expected at her hands, he could never have told.

Howard slowly raised his head, and opened his eyes. The first object that met his face was the form of Marion Moore.

His eyes were fixed in astonishment, which was soon changed to superstitious terror. His form quivered, and his teeth rattled together like castanets.

Paint Pete crept back, nearer to the margin of the clear space; for he thought he had a clew to the explanation of the white-robed mystery. At any rate, he banished all his fears, as nearly as he could; confident that no personal harm could come to him through such a being. He felt that Hank Howard must have a powerful brain, after all, to have retained a semblance of reason after once looking upon her.

Hank had but recently, as he believed, beheld

the corpse of old Mose, seated on the bank of the gully. Not only so, but he had heard it utter a groan in the most natural manner, and then move into position from the thicket. Nothing was strange after that.

He knew he could not have run but a few steps, when he heard the corpse in chase of him; and then, horror had banished all sense from him. He supposed he had fallen in the washout, yet here he was at the scene of the conflict between Manly Morgan and the bear; and not only that, but bound fast to a tree.

Stranger than all, here before him stood Marion Moore; but whether in body or spirit, he could not determine. For that matter, Hank could not determine anything.

His brain was in a whirl.

Yet, through the maze of confusing thoughts, shot one more startling than all others; and that was, that his crimes—when he had believed all was in favor of his never being connected with them—were coming to light!

Then, too, if Marion Moore was now before him in spirit form, she must have died; so all his evil deeds had been for nothing.

Even if in the body, Marion could not have brought him from the gully and bound him to the tree. This proved, most conclusively, that some other—and a strong man at that—had carried him there and secured him; and if so, that man must have been at the cove. This caused Hank to reflect that, whoever it had been, it was he who had groaned; and he must have fished up the corpse of old Mose from the river, and worked that game for the purpose of frightening him into betraying his guilt. If this was so, the game was up. Hank had no other resource than flight; and, bound as he was, this was impossible.

The assassin's hair stood on end.

His face was hideous in its ghastliness.

Then came relief, though in a startling form. It came from the seeming ghost before him.

Marion spoke. Yes, it must be she in reality. She had again escaped from her room as he had seen her on the previous night.

She had wandered to the cove.

It so, had she seen the body of old Mose?

Could she be in league with the unknown man who had bound him?

All these torturing thoughts brought Hank Howard near the borders of insanity.

He could scarce refrain from crying out.

Truly, the way of the transgressor is hard.

We have said that Marion spoke.

She did, and her words tore through the guilt-tortured brain of the man she addressed.

"Hancock Howard, where is Manly Morgan? What have you done with him?"

The tones were low, and the voice was sweet and childlike. It would have filled almost any one with pity and sympathy for her who spoke.

Hank uttered not a word in reply. He could not.

Had he been able to articulate, he would not have known what words to use in answer.

But he did not know, that soon, those from whom Marion had escaped, would be out in frantic search for her. Then he would be discovered tied to the tree; and, what then? Let suspicion be once aroused against him, and he knew he was lost. All that had been so much apparently in his favor would be naught. To crown all, Marion Moore's interest in Manly showed plainly that the young man was her lover—her betrothed husband.

This conviction turned the mind of Hank completely in another channel. With the furious jealousy, which the maiden's words had caused, came a feeling of intense exultation.

He no longer regretted having killed Manly Morgan; and he would that very moment have slain him before Marion's eyes, had the ill-starred youth been there and alive, and he, Hank Howard, free from his bonds.

More than ever did he resolve that Moore should be his. If he could get free, he would abduct her, and fly; thus accomplishing all that he had planned.

Her present state, enfeebled as she was in mind and body, would be favorable for such a scheme. He might yet carry it out.

It has been mentioned, that thoughts flew like wild fire over a prairie, through Hank's mind; and, but a minute or so elapsed while he thus considered the situation. Juana Monteiro enjoyed the sufferings of her betrayer, from her covert. She was fully convinced that Marion cared nothing for the man before her; but she knew that Hank was madly in love with the fair girl, and this gratified the vengeful Mexican beauty greatly, for she knew that the villain could be tortured through that love. It was even better than she had hoped.

Juana also knew that Hank would steal Marion if he got free, and there was the slightest chance open to do so. This would be easy, as long as he was not suspected as the murderer of Manly Morgan; for the señorita was fully persuaded that Hank had slain both the master and the slave.

"Answer me, Hancock Howard!" again spoke Marion, "for I am cold, and must go home, and to bed. What have you done with my lover? I will kill you if you do not bring him back to me."

Just then an idea struck Hank.

Could he prevail upon Marion to return to her home, he might not be discovered thus bound, and might work himself free.

"Do return home, Miss Marion," he said, "and I will bring Manly to see you in the morning. If you do not go back soon, you will be quite ill; and, besides, your absence will worry poor Mrs. Morgan."

"You are sure you will bring Manly in the morning?" she asked, pleadingly.

"Yes, indeed! Most certainly I will."

Without another word, the maiden glided into the shades, and toward her home.

Juana did not strive to overtake her, for she was on the opposite side of the "open," and a wide *detour* would be necessary; besides she believed that nothing further could be gained by detaining her, and should any come from the ranch in search of the missing girl, it might mar her plans.

For the last named reason it was, that Paint Pete kept concealed, he being much relieved at the departure of the maiden, although he had learned something important from her. She was, it appeared, the promised bride of the man who was now at his stronghold; and, should she recover, would undoubtedly give a large sum, if wealthy, for his release.

Pete resolved that her mind should be relieved at any rate, as soon as she should be capable of understanding matters; for, he decided that it would be a rascally thing to allow such a lovely creature to suffer the anguish which she must upon recovery, on being told that her lover was dead.

The outlaw was about to return to his captive, when, to his astonishment, he perceived a slight movement in one of the bushes on the opposite side of the little "open". Some one must be there concealed, for surely none of the coyotes would have dared return, fearing as they do the presence of a man. Could it be some one from Moore Ranch, in quest of the missing maiden?

If so, Pete must know it, and prevent the discovery of his captive, Hank, if possible.

The bandit, therefore, stole around to that point through the thickets, and, to his surprise, beheld a beautiful Mexican girl, seated upon a log, and calmly watching his approach. A bar of moonlight shone down upon her head, face, and form.

It was a pleasing picture.

"Great George Washington!" burst, in a hoarse whisper, from Paint Pete. "Ther woods 'pear ter be plum chuck up full o' caliker, an' o' ther bestest sort et that!"

"Thar's too many weemin' roun' fer Pete ter play his leetle game. Reckon I'm sold, er else tha's somethin' rotten hyerabouts."

As he stood, regarding Juana, in the deepest perplexity, the latter arose, and beckoned him to follow her. She made a gesture of caution, and then pointed toward the "open," intimating that she had somewhat to say, which the captive must not hear.

Paint Pete awkwardly saluted her, by removing his sombrero, and then motioned toward the river. When at such a distance that they could converse without danger of being heard by Hank, the girl stopped, and the bandit walked to her side.

"Who are you?" Juana asked, quickly, "and why did you tie up Hank Howard?"

"My handle air Jennings, an' I'm from ther Col'rado. I tied ther cuss up fer fun mebbe, an' mebbe not. Why? What air he ter yeou? I doesn't like ter be onperlite ter a purty piece o' caliker, but I'd like ter know yer handle, whar ye range, and what fotched yer out hyer this late?"

"I am Juana Monteiro, of San Antonio. I know you have some object in capturing Hancock Howard, and I must know what it is, for I have sworn to kill him, and I mean to keep my oath!"

"I have no desire to put an end to him at once, however, if I can make him suffer some for the torture he has caused me."

The eyes of the Mexican girl blazed with hate and fury, as she spoke; and Pete could see that she was a most dangerous woman to trifle with.

"Thet's another weight to sink ther cuss," he returned. "I'll own yer hes a right ter ax a explain, an' I'll gi'n it if yer'll work with me. We'll tortur' ther varmint, make him wish he'd never been hatched, an' then yer kin keep yer oath. What d'yer say?"

Juana extended her hand, saying:

"Good! We'll work together if you say so. But you, too, must hate him. What for?"

"Wa'al, I hates him fer bein' too or'nary fer this hyer yearth. He war bad enough, in my thinkin', 'fore I beerd what yeou say, an' now I hates him wo'ss nor p'ison, fer longer that, he's arter that purty gal in white, what war hyer a few minutes ago. Yer see'd her, didn't yer, Miss Whanner?"

"I went to her house, got her from her bed, and led her here."

"Gee—minety! Yer doesn't say! What ter?"

"To follow him," pointing toward Hank.

"I wanted him to see her with me, and to believe that I had told her of his villainy. I hated her, for I learned at San Marcos that he

was in love with her; but I now know that she hates him, and it is all right. She must not be harmed."

"No, dang my gizzard if ther bellyun shill harm ther thar angel! Not much. But I ain't 'zactly runnin' my racket on hate, er love either. I'm on ther make, an' I 'lows ter corral some duckits outen ther cuss Hank, his dad, er ther gal, er ole man Morgan. I doesn't give a continental durn which!"

"Thar's nioney on ther San Marcos, an' I'm a pore orphyn; so, ef yer pards wi' me, ther'll be spondulics an' revenge fer yer. How does ther seem ter strike yer?"

"They must not hang Hank Howard. I want to keep my oath," the girl exclaimed, in anger. "I care more for his blood than I do for all the doubloons in Texas. He has made my life a hell!"

"An' why should they hang ther cuss?"

"You well know why, for you frightened him with that negro's corpse. He killed him."

"Dang me, ef yer ain't real sharp! How did yer know that?"

"Never mind. He also killed Manly Morgan."

Pete gave a low whistle, and then asked:

"Say, Miss Whanner, when did yer 'rove hyer?"

"To-night!" was the reply—"since darkness fell."

"Wa'al, yer knows a heap. But, will yer keep a cluss tongue, ef I gi'n yer a p'int?"

"You can trust me."

"I'll spit her out then. I see'd Hank kill ther nigger, an' knock young Morgan inter ther drink, thinkin' he'd wiped him out too. I reckied the young feller, an' he's all O. K., only or'mighty sick just now."

"Hank thinks he killed him, an' that's my best hold fer duckits, so don't give me erway when yer slings gab with anybody."

"I'm glad you told me—so glad that Manly Morgan is alive! Let us work to make him and Marion Moore happy, and Hank Howard miserable. Yes, we must torture him until I decide that his time is come, and then I'll pierce his black heart with my stiletto."

"I'll do it, ef it pays. I reckon we'll bev ter bleed him fer wealth, and then settle his hash. Hit's too bad ter make t'others pay for ther cuss's devil deeds."

"Try him, and I'll keep concealed and listen."

Pete obeyed, going toward the open.

"How-dy, Hank?" he said.

The villain looked up in amazement.

This time an utter stranger confronted him, but he seemed to know him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BUSINESS IS BUSINESS.

HANK HOWARD had been so awfully astounded such a number of times since starting from his home, but two days before, that he had, since the departure of Marion Moore, been forced to the conclusion that almost anything was liable to happen at any time.

Yet he was greatly surprised at the appearance of Paint Pete, whom he was positive he had never met before. Yet this stranger knew him, or at all events knew his name, and was certainly quite familiar.

Hank felt instinctively that this must be the man who had discovered the corpse of old Mose, and had made use of it to terrify him in order that he might the more easily capture him.

But, then, what could be the man's object?

No reward had been offered for the murderer, indeed, it had not become known that a murder had been committed. And again, even had this stranger found at the cove the evidences of crime, how could he know the man who had committed the deed, and how could he have been aware of Hank's visit to the mouth of the gully?

No wonder the wretch was bewildered.

He began to feel that his brain was reeling.

The last two days had been ages of the most excruciating torture to him. How much longer was he doomed thus to suffer?

Death, even by the rope, was to be preferred to such fearful mental agony.

The appearance of Hank Howard was now simply horrible. The hell he suffered was mirrored in his eyes, and stamped upon his features.

"I'm slargin' tongue at yer, Hank Howard, an' I wants yer ter answer, er I'll choke it out o' yer! Yer hes ter git used ter chokin', I reckon; I lein' that's ther way ye're liable ter end it 'sore soon. How d'yer like scoutin' 'round ther timber by night-time?"

"Bin huntin' coons, I s'pose? Jist so. Struck all sorts o' game, an' got snared yerself. Ha! ha!"

Pete's laugh was exultant and scornful.

Hank now became furious, and the change was a relief to him. The man who had, evidently, tied him there, and thus insulted him, was an ignorant, ill-mannered boor; and, losing sight of the probability that, in any event, his destiny was in this stranger's hand, Hank re-toed:

"Who in the fiend's name are you? Where did you come from, and how came I to be fast-

ened to this infernal tree? Untie me, or I'll make things hot for you! I believe it is a piece of your work. I fell in the gully, injuring myself, and losing all consciousness.

"You are a coward to take advantage of me in this way. What have you against me? You know my name, it seems, but I never saw you before. Answer me, but untie me first!"

"Coward, air I? Ha! hal! You're a or-mighty sweet specimen of a critter ter use that word, I don't think! Does I'pear ter be ther sort of a human what 'u'd lay under a bush, waitin' for a pore old nigger, what had no weepins, an' bed never hurted nobody, fer ter run my knife inter him, an' then chuck him inter ther river without makin' sure he war dead—givin' him two sorts o' die, es it war?"

"An' air I 'pearin' like a galoot what, arter doin' that piece o' hellishness, 'u'd sneak up ahint a squar' white man what war tryin' ter git the cadaver out'n the river fer ter bury hit, an' knock him over inter ther drink? Say! Yer on'nary black-an'-tan galoot, air I sich a dark-enin' disgrace ter this hyer yearth, es ter do that sort o' cussedness?"

It was plain that Paint Pete had lost his temper, and very near all control of himself. He even half-drew his knife from its sheath.

The pallor of Hank was startling. His eyes were burning in their gaze, and his nerves twitched spasmodically. All his strength seemed to leave him. His bonds alone sustained him.

"Wilted right inter yer butes, hain't yer? An' I thort yer would. Dang me ef I'll fool with you any more! I'll come right down to biz. What'll yer gi'n me fer yer miser'ble life?"

"Yer kin bet high I've got yer foul. I see'd yer kill old Mose, an' Manly Morgan, too. I war cluss by, in ther bush, and yer know I war, er I couldn't tell yer how hit war did. I'd bang yer myself, right hyer, if hit warn't fer makin' money out'n ther racket. I've gi'n yer ther fu'st show in ther game, an' ef yer doesn't bid higher than yer dad, er Miss Moore, er ole man Morgan—an' they're all squar'—ye're a goner, sure an' sartain!"

Like a drowning man catching at a straw, so did Hank clutch at the slight hope in the stormy sea of guilt in which he had launched himself.

He saw a chance to get free from the tree, if nothing more, and that was the main point.

Once free, he resolved to save himself.

His captor was the only one who had proofs against him. Could be not make great promises, get released, and then kill this stranger; thus freeing himself from conviction, or at least giving himself an opportunity to escape, and with Marion?

Thus, in his depraved heart, although he had suffered so much for what he had already done, the miscreant meditated another murder.

He had but little money, and had nearly ruined his father; yet this man could know nothing of that, so Hank at once replied:

"Name your price! I am guilty of no crime, but circumstances point toward my guilt. I am willing to pay you well, but you may take my money, and then betray me."

"Yer bes got ter take chances fer that, Hank Howard. I wants ten thousand dollars. Hit'll hev ter be that, fer me an' my pards."

"Your pards! Who the deuce are they?"

"Thet doesn't consarn yeou, es I see; but I hev a baker's dozen on 'em."

"And they know I have killed these men?"

"I thort yer sed yer bedn't did nothin' o' ther sort. Yas, they all knows jist es much es I does; so ef yer wipes me out, like yer did that pore nigger an' young Morgan, thar's enough left ter corral yer, an' stretch yer neck. I'm allers prepar'd fer your sort."

Hank was in despair, but presently he said:

"It's a bargain. Unloose me! -You shall have the amount you ask."

"Don't be too much on ther hurry. Thar's heaps o' time 'tween this an' mornin'. Whar air yer goin' ter git ther spondulicks?"

"That is none of your business."

"Right yer air, ef yer gits hit; but I doesn't jist see whar hit's comin' from. Yeou ain't lieble ter hev that pile on hand, an' I'm jubous 'bout ye're gittin' hit. 'Sides, I reckon Mr. Morgan'll give that much ter know how his boyee come ter be wiped out. Guess I'll wait."

"Ef I linger, thar'll be a big reward fer ther corpus, er ther real live man; an' I'm ther only galoot hyerabouts what knows ther bull biz."

"You said you had pards," sneeringly.

"They ain't hyer now. They hev skuted, but they knows my leetle game, every mother's son on 'em."

Just then Hank recalled what had been said of the party of outlaws that had passed the town of San Marcos the night before. He now felt certain his captor was one of the band.

Then this man was a criminal, too. He might, should worst come to worst, get him into the band.

That would save him from the rope.

He could see, however, that the man despised him.

But he knew that, although the stranger detested him, he loved money too well not to do all in his power to gain gold by assisting him to escape, or biding his guilt, if he could give any assurance that he would produce the money.

He had about a thousand dollars—saved from his winnings at the gaming-table—and that would enable him to abduct Marion Moore, should he be obliged to go to such an extremity.

This he now resolved that he would give to the stranger, upon being liberated.

The situation was one that called for immediate action, and any sacrifice that was possible.

Just as he was about to cut the cords, Pete remembered that the Mexican woman was near at hand, and might want to have something to say in the matter. He, therefore, said:

"Fu'st, though, I reckon I'll see whar my critter air."

The outlaw strode into the thickets.

Hank was suspicious, but could do nothing.

Once free of the presence of the stranger, however, he made up his mind that he would trust no more to his seeming security from being found out in his crimes; for the unexpected was continually happening, and torturing him.

Paint Pete met Juana in the border of the undergrowth, and they retired beyond Hank's hearing.

"Did yer hear all ther lingo?" he asked.

"Every word. I could hardly control myself. But you won't trust him? Follow him, even into the house. Get the money, and that will be payment in part for your trouble. But for you I should not have the advantage of him to the extent that I have. I could prevent his winning the love of Marion Moore, but that is not necessary. You watch him, that is all."

"He will endeavor to escape, and abduct that girl. Bear that in mind. Hank Howard is as treacherous as an Indian. I shall guard Marion to the best of my ability."

"I reckon yer'd better, fer ef that hellun gits her, he'll take her whar nobody'll find her."

"That is something we must consider. He may outwit us, and carry her off. But where can he go with safety? Not into any town or settlement—only to the woods! Had you not better convince him that he would be safe with your band, the Blanco Bandits? I heard him speak of them, and saw you start."

"Don't fear that I will betray you. It is best that we understand each other. I may want to take refuge with you yet myself—who knows?—for I am a desperate woman."

"I reckon your idee air good. Ye're sharp, es I sed afore. If we gits ther cuss inter ther band, we'll make him marry yer, ef yer says so. How is that fer high?"

"I might, for the sake of the reputation of my family; and I might kill him afterwards," said Juana, fiercely. "But go, he will be suspicious."

"Not he. I'll scoot 'roun' now, an' git my nag. Take keer yerself. Purty folks is skase. I'd wade through blood fer yer, Miss Whanner—dang'd ef I wouldn't! Put it thar!"

The two clasped hands, the Mexican beauty seeming much gratified at such expressions of friendship. The man was undoubtedly an outlaw, but, for all that, he was many degrees above the wretch who had been the curse of her life.

Pete left Juana there in the shades, making his way to the place where he had secured his horse; and then, leading the animal, he returned to the tree to which Hank was tied.

Juana went back to her covert.

"Sorter fergot whar I left my critter," said the bandit. "Come along now, an' find yours!"

As he spoke, he cut the cords which bound his captive; still, however, retaining his knife. Hank soon regained the use of his limbs, and Pete walked along beside him.

Hank led the way to his own animal, and mounted; and the strangely met pair proceeded along the river path, toward Howard Ranch.

There, all were asleep. The dastard, with caution, accompanied by Paint Pete, entered the dwelling, and stole to Hank's apartment. The latter at once secured the gold he had secreted. Then, returning together to the edge of the timber, Hank gave the thousand dollars to Pete, who was delighted. For the time he was satisfied with his work.

"So fur, so good," said the outlaw; "but this air a small speck, 'side er ther hull, an' I'd like ormighty well fer ter know whar ther nine thousan' more air comin' from, an' when."

"Hit's a big pile ter pay out, but 'most any man 'u'd spread hisself ter corral hit some way, ter save his neck from a lariat."

"I told you I'd pay you the full amount," replied Hank, "and I intend to do it. I know where to get it, even if it is not my own. It's pretty tough, for neither myself nor my father could raise that amount; but I'll do it, and how it matters not to you. Have you any liquor in that confounded flask of yours?"

"Mighty leetle. Only a few swallers"—passing the flask—"I'll hev ter scoot San Marcos way, ter git hit filled."

"No need for that. Crawl in the cellar window of the next ranch b-low here, and you'll find plenty of brandy. I've been there."

"Hain't yer ole man got none?"

"Not he! He won't have it in the house, on my account. I go it pretty hard sometimes."

"I thort ther bug-juice went down purty

easy with yer," said Pete, with a chuckle. "But yer hain't tolle me when yer 'specte ter git the other cash. When kin I count on it?"

"I'm going to inspect matters to-night, and will have to go to Moore Ranch again. I'll tell them I couldn't sleep, being so anxious and worried about Miss Marion. Where will you be, early in the morning—say, just before daylight? Decide on some place."

"Down in ther timber, ef yer say so, whar yer war tied ter that tree. What yer goin' ter do ter-morrow? Goin' ter help ter find the trail, an' s'arch fer young Morgan an' Mose!"

"I'll have to do it, I suppose; but I'll do all I can to lead them from the right scent. But, I say—did you throw that thing into the river again? If not, do so, will you? And load it with stones."

"I'll sling Mose in arter I gits my pay," said Pete, decidedly. "But I'll put ther corpus, in ther mean time, whar nobody'll see it."

"Well, do so; and I'll skirmish around for the money. Should I decide to carry Miss Moore off secretly, do you think I would be received into the Blanco Bandits? For I am confident you are one of them."

"Yer might pay yer way in. Ef yer improve, yer could give 'em p'ints in 'gards ter makin' payin' raids on these hyer ranches."

"I bring money into the band, you bet! And I'll not forget you, neither. Mr. Moore is dead, and I think he left a large amount of gold. Do you understand now what I'm working for? Not the girl so much as the money."

As this was in accordance with the views of Paint Pete, and as he was no longer under the influence of the angelic Marion's presence, he agreed with Hank; and appeared to have banished all suspicions, to a great extent, in regard to Hank's proving treacherous, and flying the track, thus escaping his clutches.

"There is one thing more I wish to ask you," said the latter, as he was about returning to the house: "What have you done with Morgan's body? Did you take it from the river, when you did that of the darky?"

"Don't fret yer gentle gizzard 'bout that. Hit's sunk deep, with a big stun ter hit, an' ther nigger'll be 'longside in half a hour, er sich a matter. Ef ther duckets comes in O. K., nobody'll ever see ther cadavers."

"All right. That's business. I'll see you later, or rather earlier in the morning."

"Take keer yerself! Good folks is ska'se."

Paint Pete mounted, and rode toward the timber, while Hank Howard proceeded cautiously toward his home.

CHAPTER XIX.

SUSPECTING THE WORST.

No sooner had Hank and Pete left the timber, than Juana hastened toward Moore Ranch, for she felt anxious in regard to Marion.

The beautiful girl had, by her extreme loveliness, and innocent child-like ways, fascinated the poor, wronged Mexican maiden, and the latter was bent on standing by her, through the danger which Juana Monteiro felt was pending. Well she knew that Hank Howard, did he discover her, and opportunity offer, would plunge his knife into her heart, as he had sworn to do, when he had deserted her, leaving her helpless and ill, disgraced and dishonored; and that, for no worse fault than having trusted, and been leaved in a scoundrel.

Never had Juana been so favorably impressed by any person in her life, as she had been with Marion Moore; although, previous to having met her, she had hated the Texan girl, and had even vowed to kill her, should she find that Marion loved Hank Howard.

Juana flitted along the bottom-paths; and, not being acquainted with the same, wandered from her course; approaching the margin of the timber to the east, instead of the west of the corral, as when she before went to the ranch. Peering out from the undergrowth, to her amazement and concern, she beheld the white-robed form of Marion Moore. The maiden was kneeling on the ground, beneath the branches of a huge oak: the tree standing by itself, and but a short distance from the line of the bottom-timber.

It was a touching, but a beautiful sight.

Upon more closely viewing the position of Marion, the Mexican girl perceived that she was kneeling beside a mound of fresh earth. Then Juana understood the situation.

Marion Moore was praying beside her father's grave.

She must, then, have regained her normal state of mind; for she had not when Juana had mentioned the death of her father, manifested the slightest emotion. This, more than aught else, had proved her mental aberration.

Marion had been, it appeared, ruled only by the thought as to what had become of her lover.

It was now evident that she, also, had wandered from her direct course, and happened by accident upon Mr. Moore's grave; having probably known that he had expressed a wish to be buried there. Then, her mind gradually becoming more natural, she had, by the sudden shock, when she beheld the newly-made mound and realized its significance, been at once unable to recall all the events preceding her illness. She

had disappeared, when he began dancing around in the most ludicrous manner, jingling the bag of gold as he did so.

"Paint Pete takes the jack this hyer trip. Dang ef I don't be cap'n o' the Blanco Bandits, 'bolish hoss-stealin', an' start on fine work! Got ez many duckits ez forty nags 'ud fatch, an' did hit alone in two sleeps; 'sides bevin' enough more comin' in all 'round, ez I 'spect, ter start a high-sender inter Old Mexico.

"I reckon I'll take Whanner fer ther inside boss. She's a slam-up piece o' caliker, even ef she bees a little sorter left-handed grass widder. But that ain't nothin' ter Pete; ef she'll 'gree ter pard wi' me, I'm thar!

"Dang me ef Hank didn't pan out rich, right on ther fu'st off jump! I sed ten thousand dollars. Whew! I didn't 'spect ter git five hundred, an' hyer I've friz onter a thousand ez a starter. Reckon I orter cellarbrate wi' brandy. Hank gi'n me p'ints whar ter git a supply. Ha! ha!

"Pete, ye're sharp, ole boy—yer bet yer! I'm a lone orphian, but I'm well heeled. All I needs air stimerlants, an' thar's slathers cluss by. I doesn't lay fer pilgrims, an' jab 'em with my sticker, an' then chuck 'em in ther river fer nixey. I goes in fer dif'runt biz, an' biz what pays.

"Hyer goes fer ole man Morgan's brandy. He owes hit ter me fer savin' that thar boyee o' his'n from bein' cat-fish bait."

After this soliloquy, Paint Pete sprung into his saddle and spurred toward Morgan Ranch, keeping carefully within the shades.

He had not been so sharp, however, as he gave himself credit for. Hank had gone toward his home only a sufficient distance to reach a point beyond Pete's observation, which was not far, as he took to the shrubbery and avoided moonlit spaces. Then he made a *detour*, and stole up quite near to the outlaw, being concealed by the dense undergrowth.

Hank had not the remotest idea of giving Paint Pete the nine thousand dollars promised, nor did he intend that the latter should retain a single *peso* which had been already paid him—at least, not for any great length of time. He had decided to remove Pete from his path, from the moment that the outlaw betrayed a knowledge of the murder of Manly and old Mose.

It so chanced that Hank arrived in the vicinity of Pete just before the latter had ended his soliloquy, and he heard enough to astonish him. He could scarce believe his senses.

From the words of the bandit, Hank was forced to believe that Manly Morgan yet lived—that his blow had failed to kill his rival!

This was almost beyond belief.

And yet, it must be so; for the man had not known he was within hearing. Had he done so, he would not thus have betrayed himself, and ruined his chances of getting more money. But if Manly was alive, where was he?

What had this outlaw done with him?

These were questions more easily asked than answered.

Could Manly Morgan be in hiding, and urging this man on his present course?

It might be so, yet it did not seem probable.

Marion Moore had spoken of young Morgan as her lover. True, she was in a demented condition; still, her words must have some foundation.

One thing was certain. If the young man was alive, there was no time to lose.

He would be exposed as the slayer of old Mose, and the attempted murder of Manly; and that would incense the ranchero to such an extent, as to endanger his life. And, in any event, if Manly lived, the latter would force him to fight, and that to the death.

These things considered, Hank decided that he must at once do the only thing possible for him. It was the last resource.

He must abduct Marion Moore, and hasten from the San Marcos country, where, he cared not, so long as he was safe from the lynchers. He gave not a single thought to his father, to whom his would be the finishing blow.

First, however, the villain resolved to regain the money he had paid to the man, who might or might not belong to the Blanco Bandits; and, if possible, force him to reveal the whereabouts and condition of Manly. Only a minute or two did Hank spend in these considerings. Then, he was in pursuit of Pete.

He had heard the latter say he would visit Mr. Morgan's cellar, to steal some brandy; and this caused Hank to decide upon a course of action. He had noticed that there were two strong window frames, standing beside the cellar window when he was last there; these frames having bars of iron stretching across the ends, and set deeply in the wood. He began to see how he could make use of these.

Mr. and Mrs. Morgan, he knew, were at Moore Ranch; there was no danger, therefore, of his being shot at. The way was clear.

Upon reaching a point in the timber, near Morgan Ranch, Hank saw the horse of Paint Pete, secured to a tree.

Dismounting quickly, for he knew he had not a moment to lose, Hank made fast his own animal, and then stole swiftly toward the home of

the Morgans. He soon came within view of the cellar window, through which he had crawled the night before.

Paint Pete was on the point of entering.

What he decided upon, was to fasten Pete in the cellar, until he made a tour of investigation to Moore Ranch; and then, upon returning, agree to let him out if he would tell the facts of the case in regard to Manly Morgan, and where the latter then was.

Hank wasted not a moment of time.

He glided to the opening, fitted the window in its place noiselessly, and fastened it.

Then he hastened around the house, to the other window, and caught up the frame; but, before he could put it in place, the head and shoulders of Pete emerged from the opening.

Hank raised the heavy frame, and brought it down, with great force, on his head!

With a groan, Pete fell back into the cellar; the sound of crashing glass accompanying his fall. That instant, the fumes of the brandy that had been spilled, reached Hank Howard's nostrils, and it was more than he could resist. He thrust his head in the window, and listened. All was still. The man, he thought, must be senseless.

That was capital. He could recover his gold.

Down he sprung, and first laid hands upon a bottle of the brandy, from which he took a deep potion. Then he fumbled for the gold, in the pockets of the prostrate Pete. Having secured it, he climbed from the cellar, put the window in its place, and fastened it. Hank was now jubilant.

He ran as fast as he could to his horse, mounted, and then unloosed Paint Pete's beast, which he took in lead; and then sped, as fast as the nature of the path would permit, toward the scene of his crimes.

Direct to the head of the gully he rode, forcing both horses into a thicket. There he dismounted, and made the animals fast to bushes; never dreaming that any human eye had observed him. Again he was wrong.

Juana Monteiro, who had but just arrived from her second trip to Moore Ranch, thinking it time that her outlaw friend had returned, and who hid herself when she heard the approach of the horses, happened to have selected for her covert, the same thicket into which Hank Howard rode. Juana, although it was dark, saw at a glance that one of the horses was that of the bandit; and she decided that Hank had added another murder to his list.

When she heard the jingle of many coins as the villain sprung from his saddle, she had not the slightest doubt that he had given Pete the amount he had promised, then murdered him, and thus had it in his possession again. Juana was furious. She had formed a compact with the man, and the belief that he had been foully dealt with was madness to her. It was all that she could do, to keep from plunging her stiletto into the miscreant's breast on the spot.

She controlled herself, however, but only partially; for, catching up a club of deadwood, which she found at her feet, she struck Hank on the head. He fell, senseless!

Stooping, the Mexican girl secured the bag of gold, led Pete's horse from the thicket, and soon had them both in a secure biding-place. She then crept to a point, from which she could watch the movements of Hank when he came to himself.

This was in a very short time, for she had not struck him with her full strength.

The villain stole forward to the open space where lay the carcass of the bear, and scrutinized his surroundings keenly. His expression was one of mingled wonder and terror. It was easy to see that he was very much mystified, and not a little apprehensive; and especially when he saw and heard nothing but the usual noises of the time and place. He was greatly enraged, as he turned toward Moore Ranch.

Juana followed him to the border of the timber, where she halted, and watched him as he went stealthily toward the house.

What could be his object?

Was it the abduction of Marion?

The Mexican girl asked herself this, and she resolved that she would rescue Marion Moore, at any risk.

Juana had taken Paint Pete's horse, and left that of Hank; yet, she could rescue the maiden before the heartless villain could reach his lair, and mount.

The thicket would be a good place in which to make such an attempt. Juana could knock him senseless, as she had done but a few minutes previous, and with the same club.

CHAPTER XXI.

ON A FRESH SCENT.

HANK, at first, after recovering from the blow that had been dealt him by Juana, and finding that the gold was gone, believed that Pete had somehow turned up, and that it had been his work. But, upon reflection, that seemed impossible. Pete, even though he might have escaped from the cellar, could not have reached the "open" in so short a time. The person who had done it, must have been concealed in the thicket.

It was strange and unaccountable. Hank felt that he would not go through the same experience for the whole universe.

All at once, it occurred to him that it might have been Manly Morgan, who, in biding by day, prowled around Moore Ranch by night. That must be it! He had been in the thicket, waiting for that outlaw friend of his.

Well, the gold was gone; and, with it all the influence Hank might expect to have over Pete, should he again come up with him.

Hank, thus sadly reflecting, stole toward Moore Ranch. Mr. Morgan and Dr. Brown sat talking, in low tones. Apparently, Mrs. Morgan and Marion had retired. Why were these two up at such an hour?

Hank wondered if the visit of Marion to the timber had become known, and also if she herself would recall what she had seen.

It did not seem probable, but, if so, she would know entirely too much.

His meditations were suddenly cut short by the two gentlemen bringing their chairs to the end of the veranda, and within a few feet of where he was. The doctor spoke:

"We'll get where Miss Marion will not hear us. I want to have you share a secret with me. Mr. Moore's solicitor knows it, but no one else. There is good foundation for that poor girl's assertion. We can see the motive, for everybody knows that Hank Howard loved Marion as much as he is capable of loving. She meant him, of course.

"Marion has some good reason for believing what she does, I am convinced of that. I do not say this to distress you, Mr. Morgan."

"God help me! Yes, I know you do not."

"Well, then, we must look at this most serious matter from all standpoints. You and Mrs. Morgan are but half-convinced that anything has happened to your son; but, when we consider everything, we must feel that Manly would not absent himself at such a time, if he could possibly avoid it. What do you think yourself?"

The unhappy father was silent.

Hank Howard writhed like a snake on coals of fire. He saw that not only was he he suspected, but that Marion Moore had recovered, and that she recalled all that she had seen and heard. She had, it appeared, actually accused him of being Manly's murderer.

On the morrow he would be hunted like a dog! Yes, he would be run down by bloodhounds and hanged by his infuriated neighbors!

He wanted to flee at once, but he dared not move. If he did, he would be heard, and captured. This was awful. Dr. Brown continued:

"But I wished to speak of a matter of which you know nothing, but which you ought to know now. Marion Moore is a great heiress. Her father has had an immense amount in gold buried ever since he first located this ranch. He did not want his daughter to know of it until after his death. His fear was that she would be married for her fortune. So it was kept secret.

"What I cannot help fearing, Mr. Morgan, is that our poor friend may have in some way divulged this in the hearing of Hank Howard. I do not think Hank capable of loving.

"Not for worlds would I wound the heart of your neighbor—from my soul I pity him—but I cannot avoid the thought that, possibly, a knowledge of this wealth may have induced Hank to put his rival out of the way.

"For aught we know, the unprincipled villain may have already planned to abduct the bereaved maiden, and compel her to be his wife; thus getting control of her fortune. But we'll defeat him.

"There must be a different disposition made of the money. It must be invested in lands and stock. I even fear to carry the directions as to where to find the iron chest. It seems impossible that Hank should know of it, yet I do not believe he would commit a capital offense for anything less. But we must watch that poor girl, for she is in such a state of mind that she would, I fear, start out again, and this time in search of your son. You know, she spoke of evidence which might be found near at hand.

"If young Howard should get wind of it that suspicions are so strong against him, he will become desperate; and, should he discover Marion, away from her protectors, he would not hesitate to abduct her. Should he know of that gold, he will probably conclude that she must be aware of the place where it is concealed, and he would try to wring the secret from her.

"Miss Marion must not leave the house," returned the ranchero, rising from his chair. "But I shall go to the bottom-timber, and at once. I shall go mad, if I remain inactive. I cannot believe, however, that my boy has been killed. He must be alive.

"Yet the mere suspicion that he has met this death by violence, is terrible. My poor wife will not be able to bear up under it."

"We must hope the best of course," said the doctor. "We will go to the timber together, requesting Miss Marion to remain in the house, and acquainting her with our purpose."

Dr. Brown arose from his chair, and the two strode quickly toward the hall door.

Instantly Hank Howard was on his feet and

gliding toward the dark shades. His eagerness to gain the timber was so great, that he took little care to avoid being observed; and Juana Monteiro perceived his approach, having sufficient time to change his position. His excitement was greater now than ever. No longer had he home or friends!

He had outlawed himself, and for nothing!

Every man's hand would, on the rising of the sun, be turned against him; except, of course, those equally criminal with himself, and they would be hard to find.

There was no hope for him on the San Marcos, or anywhere in civilization, where his crimes would soon be known; and his one chance to escape an ignominious death, was in flight. But whither could he fly?

His gold was gone, and he was helpless.

With it, he would have been made welcome by the Bandits of the Blanco.

His only hope was in this band of outlaws, and he now cursed himself for treacherously shutting Pete in Mr. Morgan's cellar.

Abi! Could he but gain the gold, mentioned as the hidden treasure of Marion Moore!

The words of the doctor had astounded him, yet they had given him some hope that he might be able to find a refuge with the outlaws.

Could he but secure that concealed treasure, he could then get the aid of the Blanco Bandits in abducting Marion, and forcing her into a marriage. He could live with her in a cave, or in the wilds, like an Indian.

At any rate, such a life would be a heaven to the one he was now leading; and, in that way only, could he escape his doom.

It mattered not whether Manly had been rescued from the river or not; he would be lynched by the infuriated rancheros all the same.

There was but one ray of light in the darkness that almost suffocated Hank; and that was, getting possession of the gold of Marion Moore. That would be the salvation of him.

With that, he could abduct Marion, and have a band of outlaws at his back. But further lingering on the San Marcos would be suicidal.

Hank tore through the undergrowth, in a fearfully demoralized state, toward the thicket in which he had left his horse. Upon reaching the side of the animal, his first act was to have recourse to the brandy bottle.

He then recalled the last words he had heard from the pair on the veranda.

The doctor and Mr. Morgan were coming at once to the timber, to search for evidence that a murder had been committed. What was to be done? The body of old Mose, the wretch knew, was still in sight, and would be seen by them. This discovery would leave not the slightest doubt in their minds that Manly Morgan had met the same fate!

Hank Howard uttered a horrible oath.

By his treachery toward Paint Pete, he had increased his own danger; for, at once, the hue and cry would go forth, and the hunt for him would commence. The negroes would be awakened, and ordered into the saddle, to spread the news; and bloodhounds would be put on his tracks, when the corpse was discovered.

Should it not be found, however, he would have time to perfect his plans and escape.

On the assassin rushed toward the mouth of the gully, once more on an awful mission.

He must fling that body again into the river.

He sprung into the gully, and tore up stones from its bed; then he ran onward, until he reached the spot so horrible to him.

He feared to look at the face of his victim.

Great was his relief, to find that the corpse had been unmolested. Thrusting stones into the old worn pockets, and into the breast of the woolen shirt, he caught up what remained of poor Uncle Mose, hurling the body into the dark waters of the cove again.

There was a far-sounding splash, which Hank thought must have been heard for a mile. He trembled and staggered, and a deathly sickness came over him. He came near falling into the cove himself, and would have done so had he not clutched the bushes.

Hardly had the sound of the splash died away when there came that of a mocking laugh. Hank Howard shot up the gully, as on two previous occasions, and equally terrified.

Who, in the name of mystery, could it be?

The miscreant regained his horse, the cold perspiration oozing from every pore. He knew that Dr. Brown and Mr. Morgan could not have reached that point, or even the border of the timber, for he himself had run like a deer. He stopped and reflected.

He fancied it had sounded like a female's laugh.

Could Marion have stolen from the house, unknown to Mrs. Morgan, while the two gentlemen had been conversing? This was possible. She had done the same thing previously. Yet it was improbable, for Mrs. Morgan, after her past experience, must have kept close watch of her fair charge.

It seemed that old Mose was destined not to have rest and peace even after death, and Hank wondered if the party he had heard laugh would fish the body up again.

This made him think of the pole which Manly had used. He had forgotten it. Twice had he

been prevented, through terror, from hurling that pole from the bank.

Was there fate in all this?

Was that pole to be used again?

If the one who had laughed so strangely had witnessed his proceedings, however, it mattered not in regard to anything else.

Hank was desperate enough by this time.

He was determined to baffle even fate.

The gold was uppermost in his mind, and in this connection he recalled the fact that it would be impossible to secure it until the place of hiding was known to him.

According to the doctor's statement, he and a lawyer in San Marcos were the only ones who had the key, or chart, which told where the chest was concealed. That key must be his, and the sooner the better. Delay was death! But how was it to be gained?

Were not Dr. Brown and Mr. Morgan coming, probably now near at hand, in search of evidence, and had not the former the papers with him that would reveal the whereabouts of Morris Moore's treasure?

This was more than likely, Hank thought, and he resolved that the papers should be his.

He was like a wild beast at bay, and would hesitate then, he swore, at no crime.

He felt about him for a club, and the same one with which Juana had felled him to the earth, was soon in his hand. He could hear suppressed voices, and he knew that the two men were approaching. They were at his mercy!

At the same moment, there was a rustling near him; and, to his intense relief, he caught the sound of a low, muttered curse, which he recognized as that of Paint Pete. The bandit had, in some way, escaped from the cellar.

Hank Howard gave a low hiss.

The rustling ceased. Then he spoke.

"I know you. I've got news—news of gold; a whole chest full of it. Come quick! Take my hand and follow me."

"Cuss me if I does! Yer knocked me inter ther cellar, an' tuck ther duckits. Does yer think I'm a soft-head? I wants my gold, er down goes yer shebang, bake-over and all!"

"I haven't got your gold. There's some one spying on us. I've been knocked senseless myself, in this very thicket.

"But I've got news, I tell you. Come on! You'll be glad to pard with me when you know it. Time is money now. Be careful, for others are in the timber."

CHAPTER XXII.

ON THE HAZARD OF A DIE.

HANK's words of caution were not needed, for Pete could hear the voices. Jerking his revolver, and cocking it, he hissed:

"Scoot on! I'm arter yer, but ef I smells anythin' crooked, I'll blow a hole in yer cabase, dead sure an' sartain!"

On the pair went, further up the river.

Ere long they heard the neighing of a horse near at hand, and Pete called out joyously:

"Dang my boots, ef thar ain't my nag! I'd know hit's nose-music anywhar." And he stole toward the point whence the noise came.

"Hit's my critter," he exclaimed, "an' tied fast! Now, why didn't yer tell me ther hoss war thar? An' whar's my duckits? No foolin', fer I'm b'ilin' mad. Ye're a deuce of a pard, yeu air—knockin' me in ther head!"

"Hang your money!" said Hank. "I don't care a cuss, what you believe, or what you threaten. I've denied the business once, and I'm not going to waste time on more words. I've been on the spy, and I tell you there's another spying on us. We're in danger."

"But I've learned something that's worth knowing. I've got on a trail of gold, and we've got work ahead. I gave you all the money I had, to the last dollar; but fortune has favored me, and you shall have your share if you'll work with me."

"You can't scare me any more, threatening to betray me as a murderer. They know all that already at Moore Ranch. But, never mind—I'll give you not nine, but twenty-five thousand dollars, if you'll stand by me, and get me into the band."

"I'll join the Blanco Bandits, abduct Marion Moore with their help, and give every man five thousand dollars who will put himself under my command! How is that, old pard?"

"Whar in thunder yer bin, ter strike a gold-mine?"

"No matter. I mean biz. Are you with me?"

"Dang'd ef I wouldn't do a heap fer that pile! Howsomdever, I've lost ther gold yer gi'n me, an' thar's bad luck pardin' with yer, I'm fear'd, an' sides, I doesn't jest tumble to yer racket."

Just then there shot through the foliage a heavy object, which landed at Pete's feet; and the pair heard the loud chink of gold coin.

"Dang my buttons!" exclaimed the outlaw, as he clutched the bag that had been stolen from him in the cellar, "hyer they bees, flyin' roun' loose. Thar's gold hyerabouts, you bet!"

Hank was speechless with amazement.

But there was no sound to indicate the presence of any one near them.

Could this be the same person who had laughed so strangely? He had thought that to be a female; but could such have been the one who had felled him, and taken the money from him? It seemed doubtful.

As for Paint Pete, from the time Hank had asserted that there was a strange party spying upon them, he had been satisfied that it must be Juana, his female pard.

He was struck now with Hank's persistent denial that it was he who had assaulted and robbed him in the cellar; and he began to think that was Juana also who had supposed him to be Hank Howard. Now that the gold was returned, he had not the slightest doubt of this. She had been listening, and had found out her mistake.

"By Heavens, there are strange goings-on on this river-bottom to-night!" said Hank, impatiently; "but I won't be balked! The jig is up with me anyway, as far as the San Marcos is concerned. They will be bunting us by sunrise, for our trails are one. You've been in my company, and you'll be under suspicion."

"You must decide, and at once. Shall we work together? I have learned of a buried chest of gold. There is an immense fortune in it, and the man who has the papers which tell where it is to be found, is now searching the timber, with old man Morgan, for evidence of the murder of Manly and old Mose.

"Do you hear me? We must knock both these men senseless. You understand me?"

"Your twenty-five thousand dollars depends upon this, and the accomplishment of it at once. If you and I can secure this money, we'll do it; if not, we'll bring the band to help us, and to carry away the girl. Is all clear? If so, decide at once!"

Hank spoke this in eager whispers.

"Dang'd ef yer hain't got a clear head at last!" returned Paint Pete, joyously. "I'm with yer, bet yer life! 'Fore I got my ducats back, I war backward 'bout 'pardon' wi' yer. But yer talks plain, an' I b'lieve yer means biz, an' that bit'll pan out ter pay. How's we-uns ter corral this pilgrim?"

"Follow me, and be ready to help, if they get the best of me. That's all I ask." Come!"

On they went, through the shades, in the direction of the carcass of the bear.

Pete had been right about Juana. She had followed Hank, stealthily, and had been not a little rejoiced when she saw her pard in vengeance; for her fear had been, that Hank had killed and robbed him.

She had felt relieved, also, when the two went toward the spot where she had left the outlaw's horse, and saw that Pete had found the animal; for she did not need a horse, engaged as she now was. Delighted, too, was the Mexican girl, when she heard Paint Pete agree to Hank's proposal to join the band, and secure the gold and Marion Moore as well. All was working as she wished.

Why Juana was thus rejoiced, was because she wished Hancock Howard to dive into the depths of crime, gain the gold, and even abduct Marion, that she might have him the more completely in her power. She would gain, through Pete, influence over the Blanco Bandits, and in some manner, not as yet planned, would rescue Marion Moore, and restore the gold.

The true state of the case was, that Juana, through her wrongs, had become a monomaniac on revenge; and wished to enjoy the torture of the man she so hated, as long as was consistent with the chance of finally fulfilling her oath. Therefore she wished Hank to escape the lynchers of the Rio San Marcos, and join the Blanco Bandits.

Although the two men did not detect her presence, yet the girl had wormed her way so near to them that she heard every word whispered by Hank. She had been aware of the approach of Mr. Morgan and the doctor, and knew, from what Hank had said, who they were.

As the villain did not propose to kill either of them, Juana did not feel called upon to warn them; for her whole scheme of vengeance depended upon Hank's being successful in securing the chest of gold.

Dr. Brown and Mr. Morgan went directly to the scene of the fight between Manly and the bear; and, for some time, walked about the clear space, examining the ground and the thickets, as well as the paths that led toward the river. They spoke but little, for their feelings were too deep for words.

Little did they dream, that Hank Howard, and an outlaw whom he had gained over by gold and promises, were regarding them with evil glances and intentions. Yet so it was.

In a few moments, a groan, as of some one in agony, was heard by the two men.

"Great Heavens! What is that?" exclaimed the ranchero, his voice quivering with emotion.

"Remain here," said the doctor, "and I will investigate. You are too nervous to go with me. I'll soon return. Who knows but that may be your son, and that he is badly injured?"

Mr. Morgan made no remonstrance. Dr. Brown stole, alone, through the undergrowth toward the river, from which point the sound had proceeded. This was what Hank wished.

The dastard crept on, after his intended vic-

tim; the noise made by the doctor in passing through the bushes, preventing him from detecting that he was being followed.

Again a groan sounded from Paint Pete, and but a short distance ahead of the physician, who hurried onward.

The next moment, there was the sound of a heavy blow, followed by the fall of some object over bushes, cracking the twigs as it went. Dr. Brown lay, bleeding and senseless, in the path that led along the river-bank to the gully!

Instantly Hank sprung forward, as did also his outlaw pard; and the former tore open the coat of his victim, fumbling in the pockets, and drawing out a large portfolio of papers and a clasped pocketbook.

"Here, old pard?" he said in great excitement, passing a gold watch and a heavy purse to the bandit. "Take these, for we want them to think a common robber has waylaid the doctor, for no other purpose than theft. Then they will not suspect that the papers we are after was the object of this assault. You catch on, don't you?"

Pete was, as a matter of course agreeable.

He quickly placed watch and pocketbook in his bullet-pouch saying, in a low voice:

"Dang my boots, ef yer ain't sharp, pard! An' yer means biz, from ther jump, es I kin see. I begins ter think yer ain't quite so or'nary es I sot yer up ter be, fer wipin' out ther nigger an' young Mordin ther way yer did. A man can't know everythin'."

"Mebbe so they'd did yer wrong, what I didn't consider nor know. I reckon I'd do consider'ble crookedness ter be able ter corral a gal like Miss Marion. She air a prime piece o' calker, dead sure, an' too good fer yeou; er most any man, fer that matter. I see'd that much."

"You've struck it this time," said Hank. "They were my enemies, and would have wiped me out, because I loved Marion Moore. I was not a criminal then, you know, never having done worse than flip pasteboards, and slip them waxed now and then."

"But this is no time for gab. I've got all the papers he had, and I believe the secret is among them. Let's light out. Old Man Morgan may run in on us."

Indeed, the ranchero called out the doctor's name at that moment. Paint Pete gave another groan. Then they both stole away, past the mouth of the gully, Pete throwing the pole that had been used by Manly into the stream.

"Gaze 'cross ther drink!" said the outlaw, pointing over the waters. "Thar's whar I war fishin', when yer wiped them out. But I didn't s'peet then I'd catch twenty-five thousand dollars. Great Crikly! I dassent hardly think of it, er I'll go plum lunified!"

"Dang ef I won't set up a high sender in ole Mex', when I rakes in ther duckits!"

Low were these words whispered, the last portion more to himself than Hank, as the hopeful pair passed up the gully.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TREASURE TROVE.

"DOCTOR BROWN! Oh, Doctor Brown!"

Most apprehensively did Mr. Morgan thus cry out. He listened intently for some response, but none came. He was much alarmed.

Surely the doctor would have answered, had he heard his call. Dr. Brown, he well knew, had not gone beyond hearing distance.

The old ranchero, so anxious in regard to his son, was fast becoming more so. He drew his revolver, however, and rushed forward, following the same course the doctor had taken.

Very soon he reached the point where his friend lay, outstretched, in the moonlight. The head of the physician was blood-stained!

Mr. Morgan knelt down to ascertain the extent of the doctor's injuries, and found that he had been struck a blow, which had bruised and stunned him. Then he noticed that the pockets of his friend had been turned inside out, and that his watch was gone.

The motive, then, had been robbery. But who in that section could be guilty of it?

The old gentleman made his way at once to the river, filled his hat with water, and rushing back, poured it over Dr. Brown's head. Some moments elapsed before he revived, and then he was in a dazed condition. Helping the doctor to his feet, Mr. Morgan aided his steps, as they pressed on, by the clearest paths, to Moore Ranch. As they drew near, Mrs. Morgan and Marion perceiving them, hurried out to meet them.

"What on earth has happened?" asked the young girl, who was, however, much calmer and less excited than her companion.

"Do not question us just yet, Miss Marion. We have met with a somewhat startling adventure."

The maiden refrained from further words.

The doctor was helped up the veranda steps, and seated in a chair. His head was again bathed, and he swallowed a glass of brandy. As a matter of course, Dr. Brown was as much puzzled as any one present; and, when he found that he had been robbed, he became nearly frantic. It was little wonder.

"It is not the loss of my watch and money,"

he explained, "that affects me; but papers of great value to others have been taken, and by whom is the great mystery. Who ever heard of highway robbery in such a place? I cannot account for it. What does it mean?"

"Mr. Morgan, will you kindly have one of the servants saddle my horse at once? I shall search the bottom-timber, and I will shoot the robber on sight. Miss Marion, please do not let this affair still further disturb you. Indeed, it is better that both of you ladies should seek some repose."

"I agree with you," said Mr. Morgan; "but, doctor, I do not see any reason in your proposed search of the timber. In the first place, it is not sufficiently light to do so thoroughly. Let us wait until morning. The daylight may shed light upon this, and everything else that appears so strange to us."

"That is so," was Dr. Brown's reply; "but you do not know the importance of immediate search. You remember our last conversation out here; and, when I say that the chart of which I then spoke is stolen, you will admit that I am right. It is next to impossible that any one should know I had such a paper in my possession, and therefore the robber may not deem it of any value upon examination."

"Mysteries seem to increase on the San Marcos and I must lose no time. Will you order my horse, while I try and prevail upon the ladies to retire to their apartments?"

Mr. Morgan, seeing the extent of the doctor's loss, knew that it was useless to think of detaining him. The search should be begun without delay, if the papers were to be regained.

"All right, doctor," he said; "and I will order my own nag at the same time. You shall not go alone. See that the doors are secured after our departure, Clara; and, if you think best, keep an eye on the approaches to the house during our absence."

"It would be desirable, ladies," said the doctor, as his friend disappeared, "that, as Mr. Morgan advises, a watch should be kept from the windows; but I do not think there are any dangerous characters around. Those who robbed me must be by this time at some distance from here, and I now think of striking up the river, and endeavoring to cut them off from the stage-road. This we may be able to do."

"Have you thought of the trail of the bandits that have been spoken of as passing up on the opposite side of the river?" asked Mrs. Morgan in a tremulous voice.

Marion was strangely calm and reserved.

"That trail," was the reply, "was reported by Hancock Howard, whose very name it now seems disgraceful to mention."

"But I thought," urged the lady, "the trail had also been seen near San Marcos?"

"So it was," returned the doctor, thoughtfully. "You are right, madam. There may be some of that gang around."

"Let me ask one question?" put in Marion.

"Certainly," said Dr. Brown pleasantly.

"Did you see any trace of the presence of Manly Morgan in the timber?"

"We had little time to inspect it, Miss Marion. We were drawn from our course by a groan, as of one in agony. I now know that it was purposely uttered by the robber to decoy me, and it succeeded."

Both ladies then went within doors, fastened the locks and bolts securely, and then proceeded up-stairs to Marion's apartment.

Seating themselves by one of the windows, they saw, in a few minutes more, the two gentlemen ride away from the ranch, and up along the margin of the timber.

Every minute seemed an hour to poor Marion. Oh, how she prayed for daylight.

Juana Monteiro had seen all that had transpired. Knowing that there was danger in the timber after the robbery, she mounted her pony and made her way through the shades to such a distance from Moore Ranch, that she could not be seen from it. She then sped out from the shades and over the open plain to the south; proceeding some miles to a small creek. Dismounting, she staked her animal, and prepared to pass the remainder of the night in camp.

Her time, she vowed, would come soon; when, if successful in his criminal plots, Hank Howard should be at her mercy.

After the assault upon the doctor, the two robbers, mounting their horses, sought a favorable place, and forded the river.

In a little time they were in the natural "open," previously mentioned as the camp of the Blanco Bandits. Soon they had started a fire in the circular hole which has been described. It was apparent that they were in a great hurry, and had some important object before them.

Hank Howard threw himself upon the ground, and, with nervous haste, drew out the papers, which he judged were the most valuable part of the spoils. Paint Pete looked on, greatly interested. Then all that Hank had asserted in regard to the chest of gold must be true! Nothing else could have caused Pete to repudiate the contempt he had felt for his new pard for his cowardly deeds.

Pete could not read, and he saw Hank throw paper after paper into the fire after a glance at

them. He dreaded disappointment. The clasped book was left to the last.

Scarcely had Hank opened it, when he sprung to his feet with a sheet of parchment in his hand, bissing out the words:

"Eureka! I have found it! The gold is ours. Mount, and away, old pard!"

"If we do not secure it to-night we never can. They'll hunt us at daylight."

"Shake, old boy! I fear the rope no longer. Hurrah for the Blanco Bandits! I'll be captain, and you next in command."

"Then we'll have a queen—the lovely Marion Moore! May the Old Nick take the world by quarter-sections, especially this section of it, when we get out of it."

"Dang my boots! Then ye're dead sure yer got ther p'nts 'bout ther chist? Whar in thunder an' blazes bees it? Mebbe so ther duckits is all tuck out'n it. Ef not, how kin we'uns tote so hefty a pile?"

"Hush up! Don't go crazy! Give me that brandy, will you? Now try and keep your head level. The chest is under the veranda-step of Moore Ranch, with not more than a foot of dirt covering it."

"It was a safe place to bury it, for who would think of a treasure there? We can hoist up the steps, secure the box, and then sink it in the river. Then we'll make our nags fly south, make a wide detour westerly, and then north, to the Blanco Falls. I'm satisfied you will know where you are then; and we'll arrange matters with your pards."

"Then, after the excitement has had time to cool down, or the rancheros are all on a hunt for us, we'll make a dash for the gold and the girl. How is that for a programme?"

"Dang my duckets ef yer ain't a sharp one! That's a high ole 'rangement. Come on, er we won't git through in time ter skin out."

"I kin feel a lariat 'roun' my neck now, but I'll risk a leetle chokin' fer ther 'mount I'm ter finger. Hadn't yer better put ther figgers down in yer mem'randy?"

"They're better in our memory, old pard; and there's little danger, I reckon, of your forgetting what your share is. Come ahead!"

Again they forded the river, and rode on through the timber. Fortunately for them, they drew rein near the border of the shades, and, before gaining a point near the ranch, scrutinized the dwelling closely.

It was at that very moment, that Dr. Brown and Mr. Morgan galloped from the corral, directly toward them.

"Wa'al, dang my boots! I kin feel that rope chokin'," growled the outlaw.

"Hush, I say! They'll pass us. Not a syllable out of your confounded head!"

Past the covert of the pair, the doctor and the ranchero galloped; their faces stern and determined, as they gazed ahead.

"Well done!" exclaimed Hank. "It is a good opportunity to take both gold and girl."

"That 'ud never do," said Pete, quickly. "Ther gal 'ud ruinate we'uns. We couldn't 'scape clär with her—that's sartain sure. Ef we'uns freeze outer ther chist, hit'll be too good ter b'lieve. Don't crowd ther mourners, er we'll be corpuses."

"You're right, I shouldn't wonder. Well, I'll be satisfied if we corral the gold."

"Come on! All depends on sly movements now. If the women are watching, as it is probable they are in Marion's room. We'll keep cover until we get beyond, to the east of the corrals, and then leave the nags in the timber, and sneak for the veranda.

"But, we must have tools. There are shovels, standing against the last cabin in the line. Everything is lovely. So keep cool, and follow me!"

The proposed movements were performed in silence. Both men kept screened from view, from the upper windows of the dwelling, by taking advantage of the corrals, cabins, and garden shrubbery. They then passed along the shaded east walk of the building; having procured a shovel and a crowbar, on their way. The roof of the veranda concealed them from the view of any who might be in the upper story. They paused but a moment to listen.

All was silent within the house, and at once they set to work.

The steps were soon removed, and that without noise, and then Paint Pete made the dirt fly in earnest.

They could scarce suppress a cry of exultation when a small iron chest was revealed. It had a handle on each end, and was very rusty. The crowbar was used to pry it up, and soon each had hold of a handle. Although it was quite heavy, they sped in flight on their back trail, each with a revolver in one hand.

None should take the gold from them.

They would die rather than give it up!

But none barred their way. They reached the shades in safety, but although greatly fatigued, they dared not halt. On they went until they reached the river. It was shallow on that side, and they waded down the stream until they came to a place where the banks overhung the waters.

Here a dead tree-stump would serve as a fu-

ture guide. They cast the treasure into the depths, feeling greatly relieved and joyous.

Ten minutes later Hank Howard and Paint Pete were galloping over the south plain, directly toward the creek near which Juana Monteiro lay sleeping.

They had selected a direction in which none who sought their capture would dream of finding them, as it was contrary to the one traveled to reach the wilds west of San Marcos.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHEN MORNING DAWNED.

WHEN Paint Pete had recovered his senses, after being knocked back into the cellar by Hank Howard, he was greatly astounded, for he had, when first he saw some one at the opening, believed it must be the old gentleman who owned the ranch. His astonishment, upon recovering, was occasioned by not finding himself held as a captive by the ranchero, but free.

Upon endeavoring, however, to leave the place, he found the windows had been put in and fastened; and then, when he found his gold had been taken, his suspicions were at once turned toward his pard. Pete believed that Hank had informed him purposely of the presence of brandy in the cellar, in order that he might thus have an opportunity of getting possession again of his money.

The outlaw was furious. He supplied himself with a fresh bottle of brandy, took a drink, and, striking a match, discovered the door which led into the rooms above. To his great relief, he found it was not fastened. Then he made his way easily out of the dwelling.

Dashing to the point where he had secured his horse, he found that the animal was gone, and this left no doubt on his mind as to who had assailed and robbed him. It was Hank Howard, Pete felt assured, and he vowed vengeance.

He felt positive that Hank had gone to the vicinity of Moore Ranch, and he now ran as fast as he could in that direction, realizing that he would be in a most unfortunate position should he be discovered thus, on foot, in that sparsely-settled section of the country.

His fears caused him to make the best time he could; and, luckily for him, he reached the thicket where Hank was, just in the nick of time. This was, however, unfortunate for others.

But to follow up the doctor and Mr. Morgan.

These gentlemen galloped up, along the river line of timber, past Morgan Ranch, without stopping, until they reached the home of Hank's father, where they halted. Said Dr. Brown:

"I shall ascertain if Hank Howard did return, as he said last evening he was going to do. It is important that we should know this."

"It will certainly not be amiss," agreed his companion; "but I do not like the idea of alarming his father. Poor man! He has had trouble enough with that worthless fellow, and there is more to come, it appears. Time enough to distract him, when there is no possibility of keeping our suspicions secret."

"You are right," said the doctor; "but I do not propose to alarm Mr. Howard. We will merely say that we wish the company of Hank to San Marcos. That will not seem unreasonable."

"Yes, but if Hank should not be at home, he will be sure to ask if he is not at Moore Ranch, where he expected him to remain for the night. When we state that he left last evening, he will be greatly worried."

"I reckon not. The old gentleman is pretty well accustomed to the absence of his son by this time, I take it. I'll endeavor not to give him cause for concern. If Hank has not been at home, it looks black for him."

Leaving Mr. Morgan still seated in his saddle by the corral, Dr. Brown walked up to the door, and knocked upon it with his whip. The ranchero answered the summons promptly.

"Is that you, Hank?" he asked.

This was enough. Hank was not at home.

When the old gentleman opened the door, the doctor could see that he had not retired. Had he been waiting for his son's arrival?

"Ah! Is it you, doctor?" were his first words. "I hope there is nothing wrong at Moore Ranch. No new trouble, that is. Any word of Manly Morgan? He has returned, safe and sound, of course?"

"Far from it, Mr. Howard," was the reply. "His fate is as much a mystery as ever. Mr. Morgan and I are on our way to San Marcos. We want to start out a searching-party, at an early hour; in fact, to have some men from town on hand by daylight, if possible."

"We stopped to ascertain if any strange parties had been seen by you, or if you had gained any information of Manly and Mose."

It was evident that Mr. Howard was greatly disappointed, to say the least of it.

"I have seen no one," he said. "But, stay—yes, there was a stranger here, a short time after I returned from Moore Ranch. He said his name was Jennings, and that he was from the Colorado River. He had left his horse, he said, staked near the timber."

"I invited him to remain, but he excused him-

self, and went away. I spoke to him of the disappearance of young Morgan and Uncle Mose, but he had met no one."

"He was in search of some horses, which, he said, had been stolen from him."

"Our missing friends would not have gone toward the Colorado, if they were after that bear. However, I hope this mystery will be cleared up in the next twenty-four hours. Sorry I disturbed you, Mr. Howard. We must hasten on, for we have no time to lose. Good-night!"

"Good-night, doctor! You are getting little rest lately. I do hope, with you, that Manly and old Mose will turn up to-morrow. I shall be on hand to do all I can, and, of course, Hank will be more than anxious to follow the trail. Call when you return, will you not?"

"Yes, most certainly. Good-night!"

Dr. Brown was quite angry when he returned to Mr. Morgan, and spoke excitedly:

"There has been a stranger here the past evening, it seems, and that precious young Howard is not at home. Now, I am almost certain that this man was one of Hank's dissolute friends. He pretended, the old gentleman says, to be searching for stolen horses."

"Was not this the man, think you, that assaulted me? And where is Hank Howard?"

Then Mr. Morgan recalled his having fancied he heard a muttered conversation between two men after the doctor had been knocked senseless.

He now spoke of this.

"This business looks bad for Hank," said Dr. Brown, presently. "If we hear nothing of him at San Marcos, what are we to think? Nothing less than that he and this stranger assaulted me and robbed me. And for what purpose? Some would say for the valuables I had on my person, but I say for that important paper regarding poor Moore's money."

"Mr. Morgan, I am almost convinced that Hank was playing the spy when we conversed on the veranda. It was very foolish of me, to say what I did in such a place."

"This is a most serious matter. Even now, the villains may be digging up that chest. It is enough to drive one mad. I would not have Miss Marion's fortune lost to her through any negligence of mine for all the world."

"Hasten on, for Heaven's sake, to San Marcos, and get a crowd together—a crowd of determined men—and ride fast on your return to the ranch. I believe, from what we have already learned, that Hank Howard is a murderer and a robber. Marion Moore must have seen and heard more than we know, to believe as she does, and express herself as we have heard her."

"Ride for San Marcos, Morgan; and I'll gallop back to Moore Ranch. So long!"

Thus leaving the dumfounded ranchero, the doctor spurred madly on his return; to save, if possible, the treasure which he had little doubt was in danger.

Mr. Morgan gazed after him some seconds, and then dashed on, toward the town.

Each hour of his son's unaccountable absence increased his fears and apprehensions.

Dr. Brown, too, was suffering great anxiety of mind. Each moment added to his concern. He blamed himself greatly, for having been so imprudent in speaking, in so open a manner, of the important secret of the hidden legacy. That he had been overheard, he now felt sure; and, probably, by Hank Howard.

He now remembered that Hank on his departure the previous evening, had ridden direct to the timber, instead of going along on free ground; as was usual, and much more easy and convenient. Indeed, it was quite difficult to follow the bottom path in the timber.

The doctor thought it strange that he had not when he had noticed this, recollected that Hank's statement was, that he was about to get some of his young friends to join in the search the following morning. He might have known, at once, that to do so would oblige him to go direct to his own home, and thence toward San Marcos, by the open trail across country.

This still further convinced him, that the young man had concealed himself in the timber after spying around the ranch; and that he was the guilty party in the recent affair, assisted, he had no doubt, by the stranger who had called at Howard Ranch the previous evening. Thus the doctor reasoned.

By this time he had reached the corral, and thrown himself from his horse. Without a moments pause, he hurried to the house.

Mrs. Morgan and Marion, who were watching from the windows, were surprised to see him return so soon; and, from his manner, made up their minds that something important had been ascertained by him. Both hurried down the stairs, and opened the front door.

There, in the moonlight, bat in hand, and as pale as death, stood Dr. Brown.

He was gazing at the ground, in front of the veranda. They glanced in that direction.

The doctor seemed not to notice them.

Then they saw that something was wrong.

The steps leading to the veranda, were some yards from their place; and the ground, which they had hidden from view, was dug up. Earth

had been cast in every direction, and quite an excavation was visible.

The ladies were as much startled as their friend appeared to be, but his feelings were evidently far different from theirs.

"What does all this mean?" Mrs. Morgan at length managed to articulate.

"Why did you return so soon, doctor?" inquired Marion; "and what has caused this disarrangement of the steps? However, that is not important. What have you learned of Manly Morgan? I know you must have news of some kind, or you would not have hastened back. Do tell us, Dr. Brown!"

Marion's voice was pleasing and earnest.

"I have heard nothing of Manly," he answered; but in such an unnatural voice as to cause both the ladies to stare at him.

"I returned to the ranch for a most important object, but it appears I arrived too late. Oh, when shall we have peace and quiet?"

"Please excuse me, for I am almost insane. Have you not heard any one around the ranch? You see that trespassers have been here since Mr. Morgan and I left."

"There has been a crime committed—a great robbery—and I am responsible for it all! I will explain presently."

The ladies almost thought the doctor was losing his senses; and, indeed, to see him in the least degree excited, was very unusual.

He rushed to the end of the veranda, but it was shaded too much for his object so he ran into the house, returning with three candles, all lighted, and all held in one hand.

Springing from the veranda, and holding the candles low, Dr. Brown examined the flower-beds and shrubbery. At last, with a suppressed oath, he started back to the entrance of the dwelling; the two ladies regarding him with expressions of curiosity and fear.

"Ladies, please step into the library, and pardon my singular conduct; but I have been, and am, greatly worried in mind."

"I am now convinced, Miss Marion, that your assertions in regard to Hank Howard's being responsible for the absence of Manly Morgan and the old negro are but too true."

"More than that, Miss Marion Moore, you have been robbed of a large amount of gold, which had been buried by your poor father beneath these veranda steps. To-night, while seated here, I informed Mr. Morgan of the secret, which had been kept even from you."

"Hank Howard, playing the spy, overheard me, followed me to the timber, and knocked me senseless, that he might steal the documents relating to the place where the money was concealed. Then, when Mr. Morgan and I had started up the river, he and an accomplice—a fellow who, I believe, was at Howard Ranch early in the day—dug up the chest, and they have fled with it. All my fault, you see."

"But we'll trail the scoundrels. I swear to capture him, and tie the rope around his vile neck! Marion Moore, not satisfied with robbing you of your lover, Hancock Howard has stolen your fortune, and intends, I firmly believe, to abduct yourself on the first opportunity!"

With a cry of terror, the poor girl fell to the floor, in a dead faint.

Mrs. Morgan made one step to her aid, but fell senseless also.

"What have I done this time?" exclaimed the agonized physician. "I must really be going mad. Heaven forgive me for thus shocking them! I ought to have known they could not bear having their own terrible suspicions confirmed, or declared to be true by another. It is all my selfishness—every bit of it, first and last!"

And, in a tremulous state of excitement, Dr. Brown began making every effort to revive the unhappy pair.

CHAPTER XXV.

HUNTING HIM DOWN.

ALTHOUGH Marion Moore had been so decided and earnest in her assertions as to her belief in the guilt of Hank Howard as the murderer of her lover, yet, had she been placed on oath, her testimony would have been considered as very unreliable; and this, she herself not only knew, but also was forced, upon reflecting deeply on the matter, to admit to herself. She could not determine whether the visions, or pictures, that were so deeply impressed upon her mind, were real, in whole or in part, or whether indeed they had not all been imagined, or dreamed of.

Although she had the strongest belief in the guilt of Hank, recalling the appearance he had presented when dashing past the thicket, and her utter rejection later on of the story he then told, but which at that time she believed; still Marion knew that she had no proof—it was no more than supposition on her part.

In consequence of this, when Dr. Brown so strongly asserted that Hank Howard was a robber and a murderer—that he had stolen her lover, and her fortune—the poor girl fainted; for every hope was now banished. She was compelled, now, to accept, as proof positive, that which she had not been able to determine to her satisfaction was real or visionary, consequent upon her disordered brain, was the terrible truth.

Dr. Brown feared a relapse when the maiden fainted; he dreaded that congestion of the brain would follow. But, when she recovered, she appeared more natural than could have been expected under the circumstances; and declared her intention of accompanying the searching party, and that no one need attempt to dissuade her from doing so.

Daylight, which all had prayed for, came at last; bringing with it a score of the neighboring rancheros, and men from San Marcos, with Mr. Morgan. With them, too, came Mr. Howard, who insisted, against the advice and persuasions of Mr. Morgan, upon making one of the party.

The latter had not thought it proper to inform the searching party, who it was that was suspected of having murdered his son and old Mose.

He, and also the doctor, wished not to be the first to raise the cry for blood.

The party had halted at Howard Ranch, and Mr. Howard had told all about the visit of the stranger—the so-called Jennings from the Colorado.

This caused, during the halt of the searchers, a thorough inspection of the bottom-timber, and the vicinity of the ranch, by those whose keen eyes were accustomed to reading the "sign" of man and animals. Thus, unconsciously, Mr. Howard had led to the discovery, as it afterward proved, of the guilt of his own son; for the trail of the stranger, as he had come from the rendezvous of the Blanco Bandits, was soon detected.

"This, they then followed to the camp in the "open" where he had rested, before visiting Mr. Howard, and when he was alone.

Afterward they discovered the plain sign of the stranger's horse, and that of Hank; both being together, when the two had come to the ranch for the thousand dollars Hank had promised Pete.

This proved the pair to be pards—and indeed, as it was afterward made clear, confederates in crime—for, upon a thorough search of the clear space near Moore Ranch, where Manly Morgan had slain the bear, the trail of Hank and the stranger was again found, and the thicket in which they had secured their horses.

Their footprints, Paint Pete having wide and heavy cowhide boots, and Hank narrow-soled and high-heeled ones, were easily trailed; as were also their horses, after a study of the hoof-prints which had been made in the soft soil and the paths, after the rain of the previous night. This was bringing affairs near home.

The party next repaired to the bottom-timber, to investigate matters to which reference has been made; first partaking of a hearty breakfast at Moore Ranch. They were then accompanied, as has been said, by Marion Moore; the young girl, pale as death, creating a great sensation among the searchers, who, although they held themselves well in control, were wrought up to a perfect frenzy by their longing to lynch the perfidious dastard who had been, it was but too evident, the prime mover in all this wretchedness, past, present, and to come.

Dr. Brown felt compelled, at the start, to request Mr. Howard to return to his home; and was obliged to explain, painful though it was in the extreme, that there were strong suspicions pointing toward his son Hancock—a fact which would make it advisable for the old gentleman to take no part in the hunt and investigation.

Almost broken-hearted, yet believing it impossible that his son could have had any hand in the disappearance of the missing parties, the poor old ranchero had returned home; and the minds of all were greatly relieved when he did so.

When all had become satisfied that Hank Howard and a strange man with him, bad, in a very suspicious manner, been here and there in the bottom-timber, the doctor and Miss Moore stated what had happened at the ranch; the young lady relating, in addition to that, all that we already know in regard to what she had said when partly delirious. She told them of the Mexican girl who had led her from her room in the night; and of having seen Hank Howard, tied to a tree, which she even pointed out.

Marion declared that she had asked Hank where Manly was, and that he had promised to bring the young man to the ranch on the following morning. She was positive as to this.

Although it appeared somewhat like a dream to her, she believed the experience had been actual; for she had next found herself by her father's grave, and had recovered her reasoning powers completely. She remembered, also, having seen a roughly-dressed man, and said that the Mexican girl had acted in a very friendly manner toward her, had told her she had come from San Antonio, and that on purpose to save her from a devil—meaning Hank Howard, who had blighted her own life.

At first, not a man in the company, who had all paid Marion the most respectful attention, could bring himself to believe that the story was, in great part, more than a dream.

Dr. Brown, however, was an exception. He examined the tree, and finding, as the others did, evidences that some one had been tied firmly to the trunk, as well as the marks

of a knife-blade, made apparently in severing the rope, was convinced there was something in it.

Then some of the San Marcos men recollect that a handsome Mexican girl had, within the previous two days, been in their town, making inquiries about Hank Howard.

Following up this clew, a search further downstream resulted in their coming upon the spot where Juana's pony had been secured for some length of time, besides the well-marked footprints of a female.

The trail of Marion and Juana, when they were together, was also found; and then every word of the maiden's story was believed.

The assaulters and robbers of the doctor were also found, by plain sign, to have been Hank, and the stranger who had been traced from Howard Ranch. No doubt existed as to this.

The same pair had dug up and carried away, as was evident, the chest of gold.

But the fate of Manly Morgan and the old negro was still a mystery.

So the search was kept up.

At length the gully was followed by two trailers, and the plain footprints of Hank and Pete were traced to the mouth of the same, where soon a number of the party were carefully studying the "sign," so abundant on every side.

Suddenly a cry from one of the searchers caused every one to start and look toward him.

He pointed into the cove.

There, to the horror of all, could be seen a human hand!

It projected from the water, and a portion of the wrist could also be seen. The end of the sleeve seemed to be attached to the point of a small snag near the bank.

The hand was in a beckoning position, as if its owner wished to attract the attention, or draw the searchers near.

There was something more.

The hand was black—that of a negro!

"Old Mose!"

Simultaneously and sadly the name was uttered by many.

In ten minutes more the corpse of the poor slave lay on the bed of the gully.

Then there was further search in the cove and river-bottom, but the body of Manly Morgan was not to be found. Before this last was begun, Marion Moore was prevailed upon to return to the ranch. Indeed, the poor girl was ready enough to retire. It seemed to her that she could never survive it were she to look down upon those dark waters again. And, were they to draw out next the cold, dead form of her lover, she felt certain that her reason would forsake her forever.

We may imagine the mental torture of poor Marion, while she waited to learn of the further success of the searchers.

No trace of the young ranchero was to be seen; yet, as Mose had been found murdered, there was not a man in the party who believed Manly Morgan was alive. At length, however, a shout from some one announced a discovery.

It was the bowie-knife of Hank Howard!

Paint Pete had forgotten it at the last moment.

And, as if the God of justice and retribution had so willed that the assassin should be known, the blade still bore the tell-tale blood-stains.

The bowie was at once identified.

Few were present, who had not seen it, many a time, in Hank Howard's belt.

Not a doubt remained in the mind of any one.

Hank Howard was a robber and a murderer.

"Death to the cowardly cut-throat!"

"Hunt the cuss to death!"

"Up a limb with the murderer!"

"Lynch him!"

"Lead on the trail!"

Such were the yells that followed.

The cry for blood rung far and near.

Yet none knew where to turn—where to search for the assassin, or where to look for Manly Morgan's corpse.

Dr. Brown, alone, was equal to the occasion.

Calling for silence, he said:

"Men of San Marcos! We must look for the trail, over and up the river. Those demons would not go either east or south. They must be caught!

"I am authorized by Judge Truman, Miss Marion Moore's solicitor, to offer five thousand dollars reward for the capture of Hancock Howard alive, and one thousand for him dead.

"You know what that means. He must hang! He deserves to be hanged fifty times over."

A chorus of approving yells greeted this.

The doctor continued:

"A further reward of two thousand dollars is also offered for the arrest of the unknown confederate: and, to this, I add three thousand, which makes it equal to the reward for Hank. If the stranger is caught, we shall get at the whole truth, and be able to solve the mystery of Manly Morgan's death.

"They have, I feel positive, headed for Blanco county, doubtless with the intention of joining the Blanco Bandits, whose stronghold remains yet to be discovered. We'll find it though, if we don't overtake, or cut them off."

Yells of vengeful meaning sounded from all, and the searchers, having waited reluctantly for dinner, started up the river, on the opposite side from the three ranches; following the then almost obliterated trail of the party of outlaws, who, when Paint Pete had been with them, rode with their captive past San Marcos in the night time, and northwest, to the Devil's Backbone.

But the avengers followed this old trail for a purpose of their own.

They believed that those of whom they were in search would, before they traveled many miles, come into that trail; so that, following it up, they could not escape them.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN DURANCE VILE.

HANK HOWARD and Paint Pete had no idea of halting at the creek, after leaving the San Marcos and galloping south.

They wished to cross the little stream, and then, screened on the following day from view on the plains north by the fringe of timber on that and other streams, make their way to Blanco Falls. Their determination was to be in the cave of the Blanco Bandits before night, and, after a rest and short sleep, to lead the entire band down country, striking the north bank of the San Marcos near Moore Ranch.

They would then secure the iron chest, abduct Marion, and speed back to the cave; stealing fresh horses at the ranches, if necessary.

This could not easily be accomplished on the horses, if even possible; and they decided to appropriate horses, when their own became fatigued.

Hank and Pete did not spare spurs.

Too much depended upon the next few hours, for horse-flesh to be considered.

They had thus planned, with the consideration in view, that the better portion of the next day, if not all of it, would be occupied by the infuriated rancheros, and the men of San Marcos, in examining the bottom-timber from Moore Ranch up to and beyond Howard Ranch; then the following night, they would probably encamp some distance from the first mentioned.

There had been so much running and skulking about near the scene of young Morgan's combat with the bear, that much time would be spent there, examining "sign." After thinking matters over, Paint Pete decided not to tell Hank that he had rescued Manly from the river, and, if so, it might be possible for him, even yet, to realize a reward for delivering Manly to his relatives and friends.

With her fortune in her hands, Pete felt certain that Marion Moore would give a large sum for the liberation of her lover.

Hence it will be seen, that the plotting outlaw had two strings to his bow; being resolved to gain a goodly share of the spoils, whichever way matters culminated.

Juana Monteiro was awakened by the heavy and rapid tramp of hoofs, as Hank and Pete dashed toward the narrow ribbon of timber that fringed the creek near which she had encamped. She stole to the border of the bushes, and discovered, to her astonishment, not trailers in quest of her, as she had feared, but the two she had thought the least likely to be in the neighborhood.

She longed to know if they had accomplished their object in securing the hidden treasure; and, as they approached, the bright moon shining full into their faces, and she had an opportunity of studying them, Juana felt confident that they had been successful.

But if so, where was the chest of gold?

And where were the two outlaws going?

On this she was left to speculate.

They dashed through the fringe of timber and allowed their animals to quench their thirst. Then, on they rode through the intervening wood to the south plain; without having the slightest suspicion, as was evident, that any human being was in the vicinity. The Mexican girl followed them, and saw that they turned westward, speeding along the border of the timber.

She then came to the conclusion that they were going to the retreat of the Blanco Bandits.

She was thankful she had heard the hoarsely whispered words of Hank Howard, in the dark thicket; when he had made his and Paint Pete's future movements his subject. He had said that, if Morris Moore's gold was found, they would go to Blanco county, make their discovery known to the outlaw band, and gain their help in securing it and the maiden to whom it belonged.

Juana now decided that they were on their way to procure the aid of the band.

Satisfied with having gained this knowledge without any particular trouble to herself, she returned to her blanket couch; thanking the saints that the man she so hated had been led toward her covert, for this seemed to promise her that the vengeance she had sworn to obtain would yet be hers.

We will now invite our readers to the cave of the Blanco Bandits.

The band had been, for some weeks, inactive; for the reason that their chief had been shot in a raid, and several of their number captured

and hanged. Boss Brander had been elected to fill the vacancy caused by the loss of their leader; but he had little executive ability, and was, as the band had begun to see, far less daring and reckless than a bandit chief is expected to show himself.

He appeared to prefer remaining in the stronghold, to risking his precious person in raids; so he sent out small parties to steal horses, which was about the limit of his services as captain of the band. The former leader had been a dashing fellow, who organized raids into towns, robbed mail coaches, and thus kept the band well supplied with money.

There had been liquors in plenty, when he was in command; and, when not on duty, the outlaws had passed their time in card-playing, for the stakes could be heavy enough to make it interesting and even exciting.

Of late, there had been much grumbling and dissatisfaction among the outlaws; and, after the departure of Paint Pete, this state of things had increased, and there was even talk among the men—unknown to Boss Brander, of course—of making Pete their chief, should he return, and have made a good thing out of the capture of the man on the San Marcos, as he seemed so confident of doing.

Paint Pete had proved himself to be both fearless and reckless, by returning alone on such a dangerous mission, and had manifested much energy in many ways. Should he succeed in his undertaking, it would prove him a man born to rule, and the prospects were good for Pete to become chief of the band.

The outlaws were not a little anxious on their captive's account, seeing that so much depended upon his surviving; and Manly Morgan had lain in a dazed condition for a considerable time.

He seemed not to notice anything around him, and the bandit who passed as a doctor became somewhat discouraged. Manly had been placed in a small cave-chamber, and, as there seemed no possibility of his escaping, his bonds had been removed.

During all the excitement that had been going on at the ranches, the missing man lay thus unconscious. But on the same day that Hank and Pete secured the chest of gold, and about the time that they were nearing the Devil's Backbone, he slowly came back to a realization of his captivity, and began to recall all that had preceded it.

Of course, he knew not where he was, nor what were the intentions of his captors; of one thing only was he positive, and that was, that they were lawless men. How he had fallen into their hands, he had not the remotest idea.

The last which Manly could call to mind, was his finding the body of Uncle Mose in the river; and he then remembered having previously picked up the knife. This, he knew, belonged to no other than Hank Howard. And here was a puzzle.

Why had Hank slain poor old Mose?

Manly could think of no possible motive for the crime.

Again, why had he been captured by these outlaws, and probably with no little trouble and danger to themselves? They could not have known who he was.

He was positive, too, that he had been struck senseless by a blow, when he was striving to drag the corpse of his old slave from the waters. Who could hold such enmity against him?

And why had he not been slain outright?

All this was strange and mysterious to Manly.

Suddenly an idea came into his head.

If Hank Howard had murdered Mose, as the proofs seemed to indicate, might he not have seen the body being brought to the bank, and attempted his life, to prevent the crime from being exposed?

More than that, Hank might have witnessed the scene between him and Marion Moore. If so, the frenzy of jealousy would help to account for the would-be assassination. Then, finding later that he was not dead, the miscreant might have paid some of his evil associates to bear the insensible form away, to be held captive until further orders.

Manly well knew that Hank Howard loved Marion as much as his corrupt nature allowed, and would, as the late event would prove, hesitate at nothing which stood in the way of the attainment of his object. He might, then, have resolved to abduct the maiden. Perhaps, indeed, he was connected with this very band of outlaws.

Manly wondered how long he had been insensible.

And where, in the name of mystery, was he?

He had, fortunately, recovered his mind gradually, for had all this come upon him at once, he must have cried out in his agony, and made frantic efforts to escape. Such a course would, without doubt have effectually prevented it.

So he had lain perfectly still, maintaining the same position that he had since being placed in the cave; and, when he had come to the conclusion that he was a captive, he had closed his eyes, that he might the better think over the condition of affairs. He saw that his safety, if not his life, depended upon his remaining as if insensible to all that was occurring around him;

for Manly had determined to escape, and that just as soon as there appeared to be the slightest chance of success.

He knew he was in a cavern; and, by a study of the sounds which he heard, he judged that it was connected with a larger one, in which were a number of men. The language of these proved their desperate and lawless character.

There was a torch, a pine knot burning in the chamber he occupied; and, near his couch, on the stone floor, lay various dishes, and some bottles. He then perceived, for the first time, that his head was bound up; and a pulse-like beating on the back of his head attested that he had been wounded, and the same was healing.

Evidently he had been cared for. The bandits did not wish him to die. They must have some good reason for this.

Soon two men entered. Both were smoking. One advanced, and felt Manly's pulse.

"Reckon he'll scrouge through," he remarked; "an' I hope Pete'll make his dad, er his gal, pay big ter git him back. I want a big share, fer I've been put ter a heap o' trouble. Ain't hit 'bout time Pete 'roved back ag'in?"

"'Pears ter me hit air. I'm gittin' rusty, layin' hyer so long, without lungin' on a big raid fer duckits. Ther Blanco Bandits air gone up, lessen we gits a new man fer our cap'n."

"Boss Brander hain't gut ther sand, nor ther brains, fer ter run a herd o' billy-goats!"

"Thar's whar ye're right, pard; an' ther sooner thar's a change, ther better. Hit war a change o' biz in our line, ter fetch this hyer rancher ter ther cave. Wonder who the cuss war, that knocked him blind that-a-way?"

"Mebbe so I paint Pete'll go fer him, an' skeer a bag o' duckits out'n him, by threatenin' to perdue ther corpus, 'live an' kickin'. This hyer rancher 'u'd make things lively fer ther galoot ef he tackled him. He war ther same one, in course, what did fer ther nigger—ther cowardly cuss!"

"Hit war lucky we camped 'cross river from ther ranch, so Pete see'd ther hull on it."

After some more conversation of this kind, the two outlaws withdrew and Manly was again alone.

But the words he had heard explained all that had appeared so strange and mysterious.

He now knew how he came to be captured.

He had been seen when dragging up the body of old Mose, and the man by whom he had been knocked senseless and thrown into the river had also been observed by an outlaw—a member of this very band—who had no doubt rescued him, and formed the idea that his friends would pay a heavy reward for him.

It was more than likely that his would-be assassin believed him dead, and as Manly was convinced it could have been no other than Hank Howard, he resolved that the villain should fight him, or that he should die by the rope as a cowardly murderer.

Young Morgan knew by this time that he was in the stronghold of the Blanco Bandits—a gang that had long been the scourge of the country between San Antonio and Austin—and he believed that the cave must be in the ridge known as the Devil's Backbone, as the neighboring rancheros had long contended.

Up to this time no one had been successful in finding it, as the ground was rocky and the trails almost impossible to discover. Besides, the wild and broken nature of that section afforded abundance of secure hiding-places even for large bands of men.

It required but a few moments for Manly to decide that he would attempt an escape without delay.

He knew not whether he could secure a horse from the outlaws, even though he were to succeed in getting clear of the caverns; but he resolved that, if this should be impossible, he would make his way to the town of San Marcos at once.

He knew not whether it was now day or night, but hoped the latter, as more favorable to his purpose.

He arose and began exercising, until he regained the use of his muscles.

Then he perceived a narrow passage which led to the main cave, and listening, could hear voices.

Manly Morgan braced himself for a headlong dash for liberty.

He had found an old musket, which he decided to use as a club, with which he would knock down all who barred his way.

Gathering all his strength and wits to the front, the young man stole along the narrow and rock-bound way.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HONORS THRUST UPON HIM.

BUT a few paces had Manly Morgan advanced along the narrow passage, when there was a perceptible lighting up in front of him, and he slackened his pace, keeping close to the right wall, which was most in the shadow.

Soon he beheld a strange, wild scene, which would have charmed a painter.

A bright fire was blazing in the center of a large arched cavern, the floor of which was almost perfectly level.

Some fifteen or more roughly attired men, all

with arms belted around them, were reclining upon various colored blankets, using saddles as rests for their backs. Two outlaws were at the fire engaged in cooking.

They were all desperate and dissipated-looking men, and were of all ages, some being quite youthful. Many were enjoying their pipes.

The aroma of coffee, and the pleasant odor of broiling meat filled the cavern, which was somewhat smoky and shadowy.

The bandits were engaged in loud conversation, of course emphasized by frequent oaths.

It was plain to young Morgan that they were in no amiable mood, notwithstanding the prospects for an early and toothsome meal; though, whether it was intended for breakfast, dinner or supper, he could form no idea.

Manly was also convinced that his attempt to escape would not be without its danger.

'Yet delay was torture to him.

He would have been relieved greatly to have known that darkness ruled outside, and also what the lay of the land was.

Doubtless there were several sentinels, who, alarmed at the tumult his dash through the cave would occasion, would be ready to shoot him down. Indeed, there appeared but little hope of his escaping death should he attempt to run such a gauntlet.

But, while pondering whether it would not be best to return to his couch and await a more favorable time rather than run such risks, a piercing whistle sounded from beyond the cavern; evidently at its entrance.

Every outlaw sprung to his feet, without, however, manifesting any concern.

Relief and pleasure, more than anything else, were expressed upon their countenances.

The next moment a man dashed into the cavern, and a shout of welcome greeted him.

The new-comer was Paint Pete, and Manly Morgan knew this from his name being yelled out by some of the band.

Manly felt that he was about to hear important news concerning himself, if Pete spoke out at that time, for he recalled the words of the man who had felt his pulse a short time before, which proved that Paint Pete was then absent on the San Marcos on a spying expedition to ascertain mainly what reward might be expected for delivering him up to his friends. This was important.

The young man was all attention, yet ready to glide back to his couch, and resume his former position, upon the slightest occasion for so doing.

Paint Pete had the appearance of being very greatly fatigued, and it was at least a minute before he could gain breath to speak; but this was not lost time, for the disorderly clamor that prevailed would have rendered it impossible for him to make himself heard.

"Hold on thar wi' yer chin music!" he at length yelled. "Dang me ef yer ain't like a pas el of ole weemin'! This air a hell of a burrah fer ter kick up, I don't think. S'posin' ther war a batch o' ranchers 'roun' hyer, dang'd ef yer yelps c'u'dn't be heard clean ter ther Falls!"

The bandits seeing pretty soon that Pete would give them no report of his trip until they had become silent, all fell back, and the cavern became still at once.

"Now, pard," continued Pete, "I hes got somethin' fer ter sling out, which air calkerlated ter make yer all stand on yer heads with pure glad, an' cut up all sorts o' monkey-shines; but hit won't do, fer biz air biz, an' this hyer crowd hev got ter be in ther saddles, an' on ther skute eastward in 'bout es speedy a time es kin be did—that's what."

"Thet air, ef yer keers ter cram a leetle five thousan' apiece inter yer pouches."

A wild and joyous yell here burst forth from all, but Paint Pete raised his hand, and again all became instantly quiet.

"Pards," he went on, "yer all war inclined ter shove fun et me, on 'count o' my divin' inter San Marcos, draggin' out thet young rancher, an' fotchin' him hyer, more dead than alive. All right. Jist so."

"But I warn't quite so soft es yer sot me down fer bein', fer I've struck ther biggest thing in Texas by doin' it. Not es I fu'st 'specte though, fer I hain't struck his ole dad fer ther duckits. But I'll 'spain."

"Yer see, ther man what I see'd wipe out ther nigger, an' knock ther young rancher on ther cabase, war dead in 'love with a gal—ole man Moore's darter—an' she bees a purty piece o' caliker. Yer kin gamble on that."

"Wa'al, our captive war soft on ther same daisy, an' he saved ther gal's life from a b'ar, jist afore he fished up ther nigger. Hit 'pears ther ole darky bed b'en talkin' bad ter ther gal 'bout t'other young rancher, which war why he wiped him out. So he 'spains hit ter me."

"He air Hank Howard, son o' ther ole rancher down thar. He hed ter kill young Morgan—that's our captive's handle—cos Morgan had foun' ther dead nigger, an' Hank's knife cluss by, which proved purty plain who did ther bleed biz. Hank, he thinks thet young Morgan war wiped out by him ontill yit."

"We'uns must let him stay so. I bring'd him hyer. Fact air, all on 'em, down on ther

San Marcos, b'lieves Hank killed both on 'em; an' this hyer day's 'vestigate'll prove he air a good subjc' ter hang up a limb.

"They'll do it dead sure, ef they cotched ther sweet-scented pilgrim; but I've got him safe with me, you bet! Ther young gal's dad pegged out, when she war in the bottom-tim' er with young Morgan, when he war fightin' ther b'ar, an' talkin' taffy to her. She went plum luuy, but she come to arter ther ole man war planted, an' then she hearn that her 'tended life pard hed b'eu sent over ther range.

"She's just terrible 'bout now, I reckon. But I'm lingerin' in my talk. Thars 'bout enough ter fill a Patent Orfis Report, but I'll whittle hit down. I run in with Hank, an' told him I know'd be'd wiped out ther nigger an' young Morgan, an' I'd show him up ef he didn't pay me and my pards ten thousan' dollars. He war mighty skeered, an' g'in me a thousan' right down. Then he went skirmishin' 'roun' arter the other nine thousan'.

"A heap o' things happened, which I needn't spit out now. He had left Moore Ranch, ter go ter his own home, yer see; but he snake back, an' lay fer infermashe. He wanted ter know what ther doctor from San Marcos an' ole man Mordin bed ter talk 'bout, es 'gards ther dis'pearance o' ther young rancher an' the nigger; fer ther cadavers he'd bin foun', an' Hank hed swored he see'd 'em both on ther b'ar trail.

"But Hank heerd somethin' better, a dang sight, an' what he warnt s'pectin'. Hit war that ole man Moore hed gut a chist o' gold buried, keepin' fer ther gal; an' he hadn't tolle her 'fore he passed in his checks. Nobuddy know'd 'bout hit, 'ceptin' ther doctor an' a lawyer in San Marcos. Both 'these ole roosters hed papers, what told whar ther gold war planted.

"Ther sawbones war tellin' all this ter ole man Mordin, an' Hank heerd every cussed word. He come ter me, in ther timber, an' tolle me; an', es ther pa'r of ole swell-heads war comin' on ther search fer 'sign,' we laid fer 'em. Hank knocked ther doctor down, an' got ther dockiments what g'ins it all away.

"Wa'al, me an' my new pard, we digs ther chist up, an' hid it; but, boyees, we're goin' arter hit. Hank g'i'n yer all five thousan' dollars a head, an' twice that ter Boss Brander, per-vidin' he'll g'i'n up bein' cap'n, an' 'low him ter be our chief.

"He'll leal us on gold-trails, boyees, an' he's got sand; 'sides bein' upper-crust, 'longside o' we-uns. But, ter hev things glide this-a-way, we-uns hev got ter stick by him, an' help him ter git ther chist o' gold an' ther gal. She's ter be Queen o' ther Blanco Bandits.

"What yer got ter say, pard?"

Wild and joyous were the yells, and then three times three cheers were given for Hank Howard, the "Captain of the Blanco Bandits!"

These were called for by Boss Brander himself, which proved that he was more than willing to give up his place to Hank.

It would be impossible to imagine, far more so to describe, the feelings of Manly Morgan, as he heard the astounding intelligence thus communicated by Paint Pete. He could scarcely stand, being forced to cling to the rough wall of the cave for support.

Such a tale of crime and wrong was enough to rack the heart of a man, especially when in love. And what then could be the situation of Marion Moore?

Her father dead, her lover believed to be murdered, and the fortune that had been hoarded for her stolen by the wretch who was now intending to carry her to this bandit retreat, and there force her to become his wife!

It was little wonder that, what he was thus compelled to hear, almost drove Manly Morgan mad.

In his helpless rage and misery he swore that he would yet balk the arch-villain's schemes; and the thought of how this was to be accomplished brought him back to the urgencies of the hour. And first, there was the necessity of escaping from the cavern with the least possible delay.

But Manly was at once so astounded, by the ushering into the cave of another man, that he stood, unable for the moment to move.

The new-comer was, of course, Hank Howard, who was greeted with rounds of cheers, as Paint Pete introduced him to the Blanco Bandits as their future chief. Hank, as soon as quiet was restored, addressed the band:

"Thanks, my new-found pards, for your welcome, and your confidence in me, a stranger! But that confidence, I will prove shortly to you, has not been misplaced. However, we have no time to waste. By this time the whole timber at the San Marcos, in the vicinity of the three ranches, has been examined closely, and the mob of rancheros are howling for the blood of your pard, Paint Pete, and of your new chief, Hank Howard.

"They know that I killed the nigger and young Morgan, that I knocked down and robbed the doctor, and that Pete and I dug up the chest of gold. Consequently, having ascertained these facts, the crowd, without doubt, are by this time galloping up the west side of the

river, to scour the country, thus leaving Moore Ranch unprotected, which is the very thing we wish.

"Now, my first order is—saddle up. We start at once fer the gold and the girl. We'll strike northerly, curving east, and then south, and secure our prizes. Then, by the route Pete and myself came, we can regain the cave. But we must, without delay, get our nags and all the necessary tricks and traps together, and hunt another stronghold; for this will be too hot to hold us.

"Boys, to boots and saddles!"

With cheers and yells of delight, filled with the greatest enthusiasm and excitement, the bandits, very favorably impressed by their new chief's appearance and words, proceeded to get together everything that was movable. This occupied but a little time.

All was hubbub and confusion, however, while it lasted; a perfect mob rushing here and there, while Manly Morgan looked on.

The young man saw that the time had come for action, if he was to attempt escaping.

He glided through the crowd, in the uncertain light and confusion which prevailed, caught up a saddle and blanket, which he shouldered—the blanket partly covering his head—and out of the cave he strode.

On he went, bandits in front and rear.

When he reached the open air, Manly found that it was evening, a few stars glittering faintly, as yet, in the blue sky.

Before the cavern for some distance was a rocky path, leading to the somewhat steep walls on either side. These caused it to be darker than it would otherwise have been.

Manly, as soon as the level was reached, proceeded along the rock-strewn defile, from which he finally emerged with many others, who then turned into a little valley where a large number of horses were secured and grazing.

At the first opportunity the young ranchero stepped aside, darting quickly into a dark passage. There he crouched, uncertain as to his future movements.

He had no arms, and no horse, and to reach the Rio San Marcos ahead of the marauders, and save his darling, would be impossible unless he was well mounted.

Manly Morgan was, as may easily be seen, in a most desperate frame of mind.

More than even life depended upon him, as he fully believed; and yet, in the position in which he was, a more helpless being could scarce be imagined.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FORLORN HOPE.

MANLY MORGAN crouched amid the dark rocks, while the bandits, but a short distance from him, were equipping their horses, to speed toward the San Marcos River, and tear the doubly bereaved Marion Moore from her deeply desolated home; to bear her away to a fate, worse ten thousand times than death. No man was ever more tortured to the very soul than he, as he thus waited.

The avalanche of devilish deeds of robbery and death, and that which was still threatened, were so terrible, so totally unexpected, and his own position was so dreadful under the circumstances, that Manly could hardly restrain himself from rushing forward, and, with mad and vengeful yells, clutch each bandit as he came to him, and choke the life out of him with his hands!

He felt that he could tear them limb from limb.

Had Hank Howard been within sight, Manly knew he could not have controlled himself.

Yet, he could not help knowing that, only by the greatest possible self-control—only by banishing his awful apprehensions for the safety of poor Marion—could be hope to gain, by strategy, that which it would be the bight of March madness, to make a mad dash to accomplish.

Although the outlaws were scattered, and seemingly without the slightest discipline, yet there was no opening for him to secure a horse. And, even were he to succeed in doing so, then and there, and had a good fleet horse under him, he knew not which way to turn, to escape his foes, and gain free ground.

He would be as liable to dash up some defile that ended in an impassable wall, in which he would be corralled and captured, as to strike a course amid the rough rocks, that would lead him on a free course east.

Could mortal man be in a more perplexing and torturing predicament?

Manly Morgan felt sure that no one could suffer as he was now doing.

He knew, too, that did he secure a mount, and dash for liberty, there was not one of the bandits who would not shoot at once—and shoot to kill. For, did not gold depend upon his not getting free, and warning the rancheros of their intentions, and proposed movements?

Had there been nothing but his own life to be considered, Manly would not have hesitated; but more than the life even of Marion Moore bound him to prudence at such a time.

And no little anxiety was added to his overtaxed brain, lest his escape should be discovered

and a search made for him. This, if unsuccessful, would cause the band to fear he had fled to the plains, and was bent on warning the rancheros, and then speeding to protect the maiden, as well as to prevent the treasure from being removed.

For, they would reason that he must have overheard the report brought in by Paint Pete, and the speech of Hank; as the two, who had visited him just previous to the arrival of Pete, would testify that he had been in his usual place, and seemingly senseless condition, at that time.

But little time, however, was spent by the Blanco Bandits in preparation; and Manly was forced to the conclusion that, although his escape had of course been discovered, the outlaws considered the time too precious to be wasted in searching for him. He heard them take their departure rapidly, hastened by the orders of Hank Howard and Paint Pete.

These were given in impatient voices.

He peered cautiously from his hiding-place, to make sure of the route they took from that labyrinth of rocks and ravines.

There was about a score in the crime-hardened horde, as Manly could see; and he began to fear that some had been left behind to guard the cave, who might bar his escape.

What to do he knew not.

He was in a frenzied state.

Every moment spent thus lessened the chances of his being able to save Marion from the fearful fate awaiting her.

He cared not for the gold—indeed, he cursed the hidden treasure, that had been the means of so imperiling his loved one. Besides, he had won her love when he had no idea that her worldly possessions were greater in extent than his own.

But there was no time for such thought.

He must go speedily to the San Marcos, even if forced to go on foot—to run over that long trail—knowing, all the while, that he would be too late to save Marion.

Inaction would craze his brain.

His nerves were twitching frightfully.

His brain seemed bursting.

Then, the most welcome sound he could have heard broke the silence that reigned around him; more impressive now, after the recent commotion. It was the neighing of a horse, and near at hand.

With a glad cry, the young man sprung from his hiding-place, and gazed around him.

No human being was to be seen. But it was some little distance, up a dark ravine, to the caves of the bandits.

He did see, however, the horse not far from him; and rushed rapidly toward the animal, which he saw was staked where many others had been but a short time previous.

The animal sprung, with a snort of fright, away from him the full length of the neck-rope; and Manly groaned as he saw this movement, for it betrayed the fact that the poor beast was lame.

Yet, this horse was his only hope, and he at once spread the blanket he had brought from the cavern upon its back; then he threw on and buckled the saddle, first ascertaining that a bridle hung from the horn of the same. This he quickly adjusted, thinking how providential it was that he had secured equipments. Jerking up the picket-pin, and coiling the neck-rope, he looped the same to the saddle-horn, sprung astride, and urged the animal along the course taken by the bandits.

Soon he was free of the rocky region, although the horse traveled with difficulty, and entered a bushy tract. He then recalled the fact that the outlaws were intending to strike toward the north. He therefore headed south, and crossed the Blanco River; at that point but a mere creek.

Breaking a stout stick, he whipped without mercy, heading over the plain, toward the Rio San Marcos.

He could not, neither did he wish nor expect to see the outlaw band; for they were on the opposite side of the Blanco.

Afar in front of him was the broad, clear vista, that never before seemed to him so distant; for it stretched between him and Marion Moore, whose more than life now depended upon him and a lame horse.

The poor beast could gallop with difficulty, and it got over the ground after a fashion, but it seemed to Manly to be going no faster than a turtle. The agony he suffered was almost beyond human endurance.

He strove to think that, even on that lame horse, he might get to a point where he could obtain a fresh mount, and reach Moore Ranch ahead of the band; for the reason that he was traveling a direct route, and they, as Pete had arranged, would be forced to describe a half circle to avoid encountering the band of rancheros, who were, as Paint Pete had decided, west of the town of San Marcos, and were scouring the country for Hank and himself.

But Manly was obliged at length to decide that, did he not meet the party of rancheros—and that before passing half the distance between Blanco Falls and San Marcos—all would be lost; for it was presumable that the horses of

the rancheros would be greatly fatigued, and that the outlaws, who made a steady business of stealing horses, had taken fresh animals.

The young man was correct when he reasoned that his escape would be discovered, and that this would cause double haste in the band. But the escape of Manly was known to but one person, and that was his captor, Paint Pete.

The latter had not, as has been shown, revealed to Hank Howard the fact that Manly was alive, and had no idea of doing so, for he had plans of his own, which, in the event of losing the chest of gold, he intended to carry out. He had told all the band, in his report to them previous to Hank's entrance, that the latter did not know his victim was alive. This he did in such a manner and with such significant gestures as to intimate that he did not wish Hank to become aware of the fact.

He had, therefore, asked the outlaw doctor at once if the captive had recovered, and was informed he had not, unless it had been within a few minutes.

While the men were busy preparing for the road, Pete went to see if Manly was tied, for he had decided that the captive must remain in the cave until the band returned, when he would make all necessary arrangements for his future.

If the chest of gold was secured and brought safely to their retreat, Pete's intention was to free the captive and inform each of his pards that no mention must be made of Manly Morgan, especially in the presence of their new leader.

But, to Pete's astonishment, he found that the bird had flown; and, recalling the doctor's report, he judged that young Morgan must have been in the passage, heard his report and the address of Hank Howard, and afterward, in the confusion of their hasty preparations, he had made his way from the cave.

Yet, Paint Pete dared not order a search, for he had deceived Hank, and he did not believe that worthy would have outlawed himself but for the knowledge that he had cut himself off from society and home by the murder of Manly Morgan.

Consequently, with loose rocks kept for the purpose, Pete walled up the entrance to what had been Manly's prison, and hurried back to the band, by well-chosen words frightening their chief in regard to the necessity of a headlong gallop on their most important mission.

This had been the cause of the instant and rapid departure of the Blanco Bandits.

There were two men left to guard the cave and its contents, but these were ordered by Pete not to tear down the wall, or to attempt to speak with the captive, who was, in fact, as we have seen, no longer there.

On sped the Blanco Bandits.

And on sped Manly Morgan, to balk them, if possible.

CHAPTER XXIX.

RAIDING A RANCH.

WHO can more than faintly imagine the mental torture that Marion Moore must have suffered, after the discovery of the body of old Mose by the rancheros? Much bereaved and anguished as she had previously been, she was now passing through such a storm of misery as but few—thank Heaven!—are called upon to suffer. Up to this time she had entertained a faint hope that Manly might yet return.

To believe that he had been murdered, was too terrible, too awful to contemplate even in thought; and she strove to convince herself that all which had been seen and experienced by her, had been brought about by the opiates she had taken. Hence she had made an effort to put them aside, as disordered imaginings.

The maiden had thought herself equal to the task of personally, as far as was possible, assisting in the search for Manly Morgan; but when, upon having been informed that the corpse of the old slave had been found in the river, with a knife-wound in his breast, then she felt such a sickening horror that she had been forced to return to the ranch.

Yet Marion was prevented from giving up utterly to despair and grief, from sympathy for the terribly-stricken mother of the missing man. Poor Mrs. Morgan had no doubt that her son had been murdered, when she was told of the discovery of the fate of Uncle Mose. She had watched with Marion, soothed her, and endeavored to give her hope; but now the tables were turned. Marion was the nurse and comforter; although she had little grounds from which to speak words of comfort or hope.

But, when the search of the river had been abandoned as useless, the rancheros believed that Hank Howard had found some more secure hiding-place for the remains of his victim; then the poor girl would have accompanied the searching party up the river, had she not considered it her first duty to remain with Mrs. Morgan, whose husband, and Doctor Brown with him, were conducting the search.

Marion's great perplexity, at this time, had reference to the beautiful Mexican girl who had led her from the house to the bottom-timber; for she still believed that her meeting with Juana Monteiro had been real. She recalled the

fact that she had sprung away from the strange girl when in the thicket, to confront Hank Howard, as she had seen him when tied to the tree; and that she had left her cloak in the fair stranger's grasp.

She now feared that Juana had afterward been foully dealt with by Hank; the latter having, probably, been liberated by the strange man who had since become his confederate in further crime. This seemed certain, as they had been together when the doctor was assaulted, and had also stolen the chest of gold in company.

Marion felt that had Juana been at liberty, she would have come to her before much time had elapsed, and would have given information in regard to Hank. Besides, she had an idea that Juana might know something about Manly Morgan, which she had learned from spying on Hank Howard.

The absence of her cloak from the hall had proved to the maiden, that much which she had gone through must have been real.

As time passed without any discovery having been made, except that of old Mose's body, Marion had become more hopeful; yet she could not believe that Hank could, alone, have been able to overcome and slay Manly, and then secrete the body. It appeared, too, from the studying of the trails by the rancheros, that the stranger had not joined Hank until later on.

The mounted party went up the river, and the two females were left alone in their misery.

Not for a moment did even Dr. Brown or Mr. Morgan dream that any danger would threaten, or happen to, the unprotected ones at the ranch; nor did the ladies themselves apprehend any danger, for it was perfectly preposterous to suppose that any one who had been connected with the crimes perpetrated on the San Marcos would remain in the vicinity, or dare visit the scene of their evil deeds so soon after.

As for Mr. Howard, none had seen him since the doctor had been forced to tell the poor old gentleman that his son had, it was certain, murdered old Mose; and that strong evidence pointed to him as the perpetrator of the other crimes. The party say that Howard Ranch was closed, the shutters fastened; and, as they had no words of cheer or comfort for the unhappy father, they rode sadly past, having only pity for the man within.

That bright, sunny day passed as a most dismal and terrible one to poor Mr. Howard.

And Marion had found it impossible for her to instill hope into the breast of Mrs. Morgan, until, in the evening, when she went down into the front hall—the door to which had been kept secured—when she saw slipped under the front door a letter. Picking it up, she saw it was addressed to herself.

It was written upon a soiled and crumpled piece of paper, probably found in the gardens, or flying about in the breeze; but it was the most welcome and important epistle the maiden had ever received. Indeed, it was priceless; and, as Marion's eyes ran over the few lines, she gave a cry of such great joy that Mrs. Morgan ran out from her chamber, exclaiming:

"What has happened now, Marion dear?"

"Good news!" was the answer, as the young girl rushed up the stairs.

The old lady appeared to think her youthful charge had gone crazy. It was certain that no one had arrived at the ranch, or she would have heard his approach.

But soon all was to be made clear.

"Listen to this," said Marion, radiant with joy: "listen to this. I found the note, where it had been thrust under the hall door. It is from that Mexican girl, who conducted me to the timber.

"Now you will admit it was no dream."

Then Marion read aloud the letter.

"MY DEAR MISS MOORE:—

"I have not been idle since you left me so abruptly in the thicket. Indeed! I have ridden many miles, and I feel it my duty to relieve your anxiety all that I can. Manly Morgan was not killed by Hancock Howard, but the latter believes that the blow which he struck him caused his death. He is not dead, but is many miles away, and I think is quite ill—probably insensible—but he will soon be restored to his friends."

"Do not be hopeless, even should you find yourself, for a time, in the power of the fiend who has so wronged your friend."

JUANA MONTEIRO."

The joy and relief of both Marion and Mrs. Morgan were beyond description.

Neither of them, at the time, strove to account for the meaning of the latter portion of the communication; but the time would come, and that soon, when they would remember those words, and wonder why Juana had not written more definitely of the danger that threatened them, and warned them to guard against it.

Much did Marion Moore regret that the Mexican girl did not make known her presence at the ranch, and indeed remained with them; giving them, in full, the important information she had gained.

Juana Monteiro had slept far into the day, in the cool creek bottom; and then returned to the San Marcos, but at a point far below Moore Ranch she had approached the latter place under cover of the timber; and, recalling more vividly the pallid face of the maiden, and think-

ing it cruel on her part to withhold any news that would lessen her fearful anxiety and dread, she had written the letter which we have seen. Then, without having been observed by any one, she had thrust the epistle beneath the door of the dwelling.

She had then observed that the front steps had been removed from their place, the ground being dug up; and this convinced her that Hank and Pete had removed the buried chest from that very place. But, whither had it been taken?

The negroes had been excused from work, and all were so impressed with superstitious terror in regard to the several startling events which had so recently occurred, that they sat within their cabins, and for no consideration would have ventured into the dark shades of the timber. All trembled with fright, when poor old Mose was mentioned; or, when they caught a view, from door or window, of the cabin within which the corpse had been borne by the rancheros.

No one, unless in a like situation, could imagine the relief and joy that the letter of Juana Monteiro produced upon Marion and Mrs. Morgan.

Neither of them had any doubt as to the truth of the assertion, that Manly had not been killed, for they dared not harbor such a thought, although it did appear strange and unaccountable—indeed, almost impossible—for that young girl, alone and unassisted, to have gained information, which the doctor and the large party with him had so signally failed to do.

Dr. Brown was too much excited and infuriated, to argue that it would have been unreasonable, and almost impossible, for the two thieves to have carried away such a heavy chest any great distance; or, if they had removed the money from it, the chest itself would not be far off. So eager had he been to capture the robbers, that there had been little judgment used in the search, or it is quite possible the keen-eyed trailers would have found the missing treasure of Morris Moore.

The day passed into night, Mrs. Morgan and Marion sitting up until late; hoping some of their friends would return, and bring Manly with them. But, just before midnight, the two retired, and both fell into a sound slumber, which, considering their previous privation from sleep, promised to last far into the following day.

But that, the first sleep taken by them since the disappearance of Morgan, that had been free from horrible dreams in connection with him, was fated to be broken in a fearful manner. Their hope and confidence that the worst was now over, was to be dashed to the ground, and they were to be plunged into the most torturing despair.

The moon shone brightly; when both ladies were startled from their slumber, and sprung up in bed; bewildered and terrified by a crash from below, evidently on the veranda, or at the front door.

They sat speechless for a moment, listening without exchanging a word; indeed, neither of them could speak. Then both arose, and went to the window. Many mounted men were below.

The first thought of the pair was, that the rancheros had returned; but soon the awful truth burst upon them, as another crash sounded against the door.

They knew, then, that the ranch was surrounded by a band of lawless men; and, for the first time, they thought of the Blanco Bandits.

"Oh! God protect us! In the name of justice, what are we to expect next?"

Thus cried out poor Mrs. Morgan, in a voice expressive of the utmost fear and horror.

"Father in Heaven, save us!" burst prayerfully, from Marion Moore's lips. "Lock, Mrs. Morgan! there is Hank Howard! All is plain now."

"He is a bandit. He has outlawed himself, and is desperate. Why is he here, but to tear me from my home, and the grave of my father? Oh, would that our friends had remained here!"

"Let us dress quickly, or the demons will burst into our chamber. We may perhaps hide from them. We must make all the haste we can."

Trembling in every limb, the two females apareded themselves; just as, with a terrific sound, the front door was burst from its hinges, and fell with a crash upon the floor of the hall!

The next moment, came the noise of the approach of booted men; and then, a rapid and loud knocking upon the door of the apartment.

Pale as death, the two women stood as if paralyzed; unable either to move or speak.

Thus, for a moment—then the door was kicked open, and Hank Howard, his swarthy face fiendishly exultant, stood before them!

With shrieks the most despairing, and expressive of the very extremity of terror, Mrs. Morgan and Marion fell senseless to the floor!

"Ha! ha! ha! my love!" exclaimed Hank, as he sprang forward and clasped Marion's senseless form in his arms; "excuse the abruptness of my appearance, and my coming so uncere-

moniously and with such unusual commotion, but I was in something of a hurry. You see, your friends are seeking me with a lariat already noosed.

"However, I am relieved to find you so passive. It will be less trouble to tote you, and less dangerous for me and my pard to have your tongue silenced without gagging. Come, my darling, to my mountain home. A life of love and freedom is before us."

Down the stairs the villain dashed, and out upon the veranda. He then climbed into his saddle, his horse being held ready by one of the band. In a minute more all was quiet.

Mrs. Morgan was left lying senseless; all the rooms being rifled by the outlaws in search of money and jewelry. And that, notwithstanding they had robbed the orphaned girl of her fortune and her liberty, deprived her of her lover, and had assisted a most dastardly wretch and assassin in abducting her; that he might convey her to a doom, to which death, even in a violent form, would be far preferable.

CHAPTER XXX. SHARING THE SPOILS.

AFTER Juana Monteiro had slipped the letter under the door at Moore Ranch, she returned to the bottom-timber, and, after crossing the river, prepared herself some food, with which she had provided herself at San Marcos. Indeed, she had the wherewithal to remain in camp fully a week, with the addition of fish and game.

She dared not shoot her revolver, for fear of betraying her presence; for she wanted full control of her own movements until she had accomplished the revenge, of which she had vowed she would not be deprived by any one. She caught a fish, and cooked her food at the same "open," and in the same circular cavity which the outlaws had made use of; and, later on, where Pete and Hank had read the papers stolen from Dr. Brown.

Juana had no doubts as to the destination of Hank Howard and his new pard.

She felt assured that, with the Blanco Bandits, they would return in the small hours of the coming night; and she was resolved to watch their movements, and follow them to their stronghold.

There, after Hank should have accomplished all his dastard schemes and plots, and when he should be in the height of his cowardly triumph, she would step in and defeat him. She would tear down his airy castles, and, after he had lost all through her, she would bury her knife in his craven heart.

Having selected a small open space, a short distance from where she had broken her fast, the Mexican girl lay down for the night, having first staked her pony. It was midnight, as she judged, when she arose and stole to the border of the timber, whence she could command a view of the plains north of the San Marcos River; over which, she felt, some of the Blanco Bandits would come, on their way to Moore Ranch.

But, some time elapsed before she could discern any break or blot in the wide and level vista. Then a black speck appeared in the northwest, which grew larger and larger; and she became satisfied that all her conclusions had been correct—that Hancock Howard and Paint Pete had succeeded in getting control of the Blanco Bandits. Juana had no idea that Pete would prove true to Hank, any longer time than was necessary to secure the gold which he hoped to gain through such partnership.

She determined that, did the outlaws secure the fortune of Marion Moore, the maiden should have the same returned to her; even though she must risk her life in bringing this about.

The higher the pinnacle of success, the greater the exultation Hank Howard should reach and enjoy, the deeper and more satisfactory would be the vengeance which seemed to rule Juana, to the utter exclusion of pity and compassion, even for Marion Moore. This was evident, for Juana could easily have prevented the capture of the poor girl, by warning her of the approach of her most dastardly enemy.

But, it was with Juana Monteiro as with Paint Pete. The influence which the angelic beauty of Marion had over them, well nigh vanished when her presence was no longer with them.

Juana had not long to wait on the border of the shades, for the black spot, of which we have spoken, grew to be distinguishable as a body of horsemen; and, before she could have believed it possible, the Mexican girl could even recognize the forms of Hank and Pete, who were in front.

The band was made up of the most villainous-looking men imaginable; their faces stamped with crime, their clothing rough and ragged, and their whole appearance worn, camp stained, and disreputable generally.

They rode like the wind, and had thus ridden, it was evident, for a long time and distance; as their animals were galloping in a labored and staggering gait, and were bespattered with foam.

Straight toward the point in the timber that was nearest the old camp in the "open," Paint

Pete led the Blanco Bandits; some twenty in number, and all armed to the teeth, as Juana could see plainly, for they sped directly past the thicket in which she was, and within a few yards of her.

Their faces were expressive of great eagerness and anticipated success; although, as yet, they knew not what was in store for them.

When they dashed into the timber, and to the "open," they all, except Pete and Hank, sprung to the ground, throwing themselves beside their panting steeds, to relieve themselves after such long and rapid experience in the saddle.

Hank and Pete hastened to cross the river, to reconnoiter the ranch; but they returned in a very few minutes, reporting, with great triumph in their tones, that "all was clear."

Once more the bandits were in saddle, and pressing down the stream, amid the timber; Pete and Hank, as before, in the lead.

Juana kept close in their rear, watching every movement; her black eyes blazing with anticipated revenge, as she kept the form of Hank Howard constantly in view.

After proceeding a couple of hundred yards, the leaders turned their animals into the stream, and forded it; Hank and Pete, however, giving their bridle-reins into the hands of their nearest comrades, while they themselves dismounted and waded into and down the river. Juana watched them closely.

Narrowly did they scan the bank, and their faces betrayed much apprehension in regard to the safety of the chest of gold; but soon, with sticks thrust down into the water, they discovered it, just as it had been left by them. With a low cry of joy, and a jubilant manner, they waved their hands to assure the band that all was well. They then thrust downward their arms, and the next moment were wading under the weight of the heavy chest, on their way back to the band, who could hardly suppress yell of joy.

The chest was carried up the bank, to the nearest "open," in the middle of which it was placed. Then, by a low order from Hank, the bandits were caused to form a circle around the stolen treasure, and dismount; three of them being instructed to advance, one up and one down the river, and another to the border of the timber, to keep guard and warn the band of any possible danger.

Then, taking a hatchet from his saddle, Hank Howard gave several hard blows on the padlock of the chest, at length knocking it free. The hasp was then cast off the staple, and the chest was open.

There lay, revealed to the astonished and overjoyed gaze of all, an immense amount in gold; all in eagles and double eagles!

Although they had expected, or had been led to expect such a sight, still the outlaws could hardly believe their senses; but, when the promised five thousand dollars was passed to each, and he was to quickly put the same away in his saddle pockets, then they could hardly restrain their joy; and, but for the danger of such a proceeding, would have given three times three cheers for Hank Howard and Paint Pete.

A double amount was given to Boss Brander, the ex-chief, and then the bulk of poor Marion Moore's fortune was at once wrapped in buck-skin, brought for the purpose—several thousands in a package—and the whole placed in a strong leather sack, which had been brought on a pack-horse.

The shares of the guards had been laid on the grass in separate piles, and they were now called up, and the gold delivered to them.

Paint Pete preferred leaving his share with that of Hank, for he did not wish the band to know the amount that had been promised him; besides, he wanted an excuse for keeping watch and guard over the pack-horse, which was to him a very important matter.

Improbable events might occur at any time—so Pete reasoned to himself—and if the worst came to the worst, and there should be danger of the band being overpowered by the rancheros, he determined to abscond with the pack-horse, when, should he succeed in getting away with the bulk of the money, he would have no trouble in establishing himself in his long-dreamed-of "High-sender in Ole Mex." Pete's Spanish, it will be seen, was not the purest Castilian.

Whether Paint Pete thought of Juana Monteiro in connection with his hacienda, or castle in New Spain, it would be impossible to say, but it seemed as though he had banished the Mexican woman from his mind entirely. Pete was essentially one ideaed.

After the distribution of the gold, the chest which had contained it was carried along toward the ranch.

When the corrals were gained, Hank and Pete really believed, as did the entire band, that the fates were in their favor; and it certainly did so seem, for there were at least sixty fine horses in one corral. These had been driven in, unfortunately, that very morning, by the negro borderers, who feared, after the recent startling occurrences, to remain out on the range.

Then followed a trampling and snorting, and rushing back and forth among the frightened animals, as the bandits lassoed them, and trans-

ferred their equipments to the fresh steeds, leaving their fatigued mustangs, which had brought them from their stronghold at a rapid gallop from the start.

When the transfer had been made, and the weary beasts led into the corral—to further infuriate the rancheros when the latter should arrive—a log was procured, and the front door burst in, as already detailed.

Thus was Marion Moore secured.

She was then brought out by Hank Howard, who mounted, and called the band around him.

The negroes had been terrified nearly to death, and had remained in their securely-barred cabins, which were not molested by the outlaws.

"Men!" cried out Hank, "we have no time to lose. I have kept my word, and we have been successful in all that I proposed to do. We are all right now, if we but gain our rocky retreat, and have a rest."

"Then, hurrah for the Rio Grande!

"We'll establish a paradise there. You shall each have a beautiful Mexican wife."

"Those confounded rancheros, fortunately for us, have undoubtedly passed some distance up the country, due west. We will point south, then west, and then north, to the Devil's Backbone; and that, as fast as fresh nags can carry us."

"At any moment, the pursuit may commence; and they may guess right as to our course, and cut us off. We are not strong enough in numbers to cope with them."

"Come on, boys! We've won the game, and swept the board. The gold and the girl have got to fly fast from the Rio San Marcos."

"Hurrah for the Blanco Bandits!"

Taking the cue from their new chief, all gave a wild and joyous cheer; then, as Pete and Hank drove spurs, the entire band swept from Moore Ranch, southward, over the moonlit prairie; on the same course that had been successfully followed by Hank and Pete.

All this had been seen by Juana Monteiro.

When the latter beheld Marion Moore, unconscious, and clasped in the arms of the dastard who had blighted her own young life—then, and not until then, did the Mexican girl wish—oh, so much!—that she had chosen a more direct course to gain her revenge; and which would have enabled her to save that poor maiden from the terror and horror which she must suffer, until torn from the arms of that most despicable coward and assassin.

Juana was now greatly tortured, and greatly puzzled as well.

She knew not what to do.

Were the rancheros to return, she felt it would be her duty to lead them to the rescue; but they must promise, in such case, that Hank Howard should be hers, to do with him as she willed. With this understanding, she was ready to do anything that might be required of her. Wanting this, she would do nothing.

Juana crouched at the border of the timber, communing with her distracted thoughts.

Again, all was still and silent around Moore Ranch; where, in an upper chamber, lay Mrs. Morgan, as if life had left her, forever.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

MANLY MORGAN presented a most wild and unnatural appearance, as he urged the lame and panting horse on toward the east; being forced to beat the poor animal without cessation, although it pained him to do so. Still, the horse must not be considered in the balance, when the life of Marion Moore depended upon his reaching the ranch before the Blanco Bandits.

Manly had no hat, and from excitement and exertion, his wound had been opened, and the blood was now filtering through his hair. His handsome face was baggard, and his clothing was torn and blood-stained from the bear-fight; the wounds he had received from Bruin yet giving him pain, while from loss of blood—the effects of the blow given by Hank—and the awful apprehension he endured, he was pale as a corpse.

On and on he urged the trembling and wavering horse, which gave out groans that were almost human, as he lashed it.

And, continuously, Manly kept his eyes sweeping the plain ahead, in a long gaze; his eyes starting out unnaturally from their sockets. He was the picture of misery, anguish, and agony of soul; the appearance and strained efforts, and disability of the beast he bestrode, being in keeping with him in these respects.

Long he thus galloped the poor horse, until it fell prone to the earth at last; and Manly Morgan was thrown violently to the ground, his whole attention having been concentrated in viewing the broad and level expanse that was spread out before him.

There he lay, senseless and bleeding; the flesh, where it had been torn by the bear, being freshly opened by his fall. There, upon the prairie, he lay; while near him was the poor horse, so broken and fatigued that even its head lay flat upon the plain.

And while the unhappy young man lay thus, a horde of merciless bandits were speeding, to

tear his heart's idol from her home, and from her father's newly made grave!

Surely the guardian angels of both Marion and Manly had little care of them then.

How long Manly remained thus, he did not know; and, when he did recover, finding how he was situated, he groaned in an anguish of soul that was heart-rending. But, gathering all his strength, which his dread forebodings doubled, he gave one pitying glance at the prostrate horse, and then ran eastward, as fast as he could; his gaze seeking some break in the view, that should give him hope.

But a short distance had he thus run, when he gave a loud cry of relief; for, far ahead, he beheld a dark mass, which he had not believed, until he gave vent to his emotions in an outcry, were really horsemen. But they were, indeed, and were approaching him.

Their movement was so slow, however, as to be hardly distinguishable; but the young ranchero's practiced eye soon decided him that there was hope, that friends were galloping west, toward him, although not appearing to move until sometime after he had discovered them.

Manly knew that this body of horsemen must be friends, in search of some trace of him; for the outlaw band must be, he reasoned, far to the north, or at least northeast, and had he remained long insensible, he was positive they had made the curve toward Moore Ranch.

He strove to overcome his weakness, realizing that every step he made, not only lessened the distance between him and Marion but lessened the danger of being captured.

He dared not think of her in the power of the doubled-dyed villain who had assassinated poor old Mose, and attempted his own life.

It was too terrible to imagine his darling in such an awful position.

How Manly wished he could increase his vocal powers a thousand-fold, that he might yell to the horsemen, who were now riding toward him, to turn, and speed back to Moore Ranch! But this was impossible.

He must hasten on. And he did so.

He knew that the rancheros of the San Marcos, as he hoped and believed the horsemen to be, could not see him—a single man, and dismounted at that—on the plain for a long time after he had discovered them; and, when they did, they would not dream it was he, as they must believe him dead. But he also knew, that so strange an object as a footman on that broad plain would, at once, attract attention, and draw them toward him.

At length, he could distinguish the men more plainly; and, although they were galloping at full speed, he knew just the moment when they made him out to be a human being was was heading toward them. They forthwith increased their speed, and soon Manly recognized them as rancheros from the San Marcos. This gave him such joy and relief, as to cause him to fall to the sward; and strive as he might, he was too faint and weak to regain a standing posture.

But he crawled toward them, upon his hands and knees; and, ere long, was able to recognize among them his own father, and Dr. Brown.

The greatest wonder and astonishment were visible upon the faces of every man in the party, as they dashed up toward the creature that was creeping toward them. The doctor sprung from his horse, and, rushing forward, assisted the poor fellow to his feet.

Not then, even, was he recognized, and it was not to be wondered at, appearing as he did, found as he was, and supposed by all to have been murdered. At first poor Manly could not articulate a word; but, by a superhuman effort, he regained his voice, and cried out:

"Back, my friends! Back, as fast as you can ride, to Moore Ranch! Or the Blanco Bandits will tear Marion Moore from her home!"

"They are commanded by Hank Howard, and they gallop now to rob me of all I care for on earth. Back, I say, for the love of Heaven, before it is too late!"

To say that the listeners were astonished, would be but a mild term to use. They were the most dumfounded set of men that could be imagined. Amazement, relief, and then the deepest concern, rushed upon them so suddenly and unexpectedly, that they were completely bewildered.

"Manly Morgan, as sure as fate!"

"My son! Thank God, my son!"

This last from Mr. Morgan, as he alighted from his horse, and tottered toward Manly.

"Well, of all things!" exclaimed Dr. Brown. "This is most miraculous, most providential! The mystery is solved, gentlemen."

The rancheros stood in a circle around Manly, his father and the doctor. None of them seemed to have more than half-comprehended Manly's hurried and pleading entreaties.

"Spur back, or all is lost!" yelled the young man again, shaking himself free.

"Did you not understand me? Those fiends will be at Moore Ranch before morning, to carry away the gold and its owner! Hank Howard intends to abduct Marion Moore."

"Leave me to stagger on, but if there is one spark of mercy or manhood in this crowd, spur deep, to save that orphaned girl from the most fearful fate on earth!"

"Yes; back, men!" yelled the doctor. "Mr. Morgan, your horse will carry double. Take your son, and make your way back with him."

"We'll save Marion Moore, and her gold too, if it's recorded we are to do so. If not, we can follow the trail of the demons."

"Don't try to keep up with us, but get a fresh mount at Dodd's Ranch, and then follow at speed, if Manly can stand the ride. Here"—handing the old ranchero a bottle—"give him a little of this brandy occasionally."

"Now men, for vengeance! Death to Hank Howard! Death to the Blanco Bandits!"

With vengeful yells the whole party, led by Dr. Brown, shot headlong on their back trail, spurring at every bound of their steeds, which were already foam-flecked and panting.

Their departure seemed to relieve Manly, and still to cause regret; for, oh, how he longed to be in their ranks!

"Father, please don't talk!" the young man pleaded; "but press on to Dodd's Ranch. I must be in at the death, if horse flesh can take me. There is every reason why I should."

This was, as his father assisted him to a seat before him. The latter climbed up into the saddle, uttering words of sympathy; and away they dashed, after the fast flying band of rancheros.

There had been no time for explanations, or any words that were not pertinent to the occasion; for all were but too sensible of the dreadful fate that awaited the maiden at Moore Ranch—the fair Marion, who was so beloved and respected, and upon whom had already come so much suffering, grief, and wrong. They were greatly rejoiced that Manly Morgan, had not been murdered, and especially that they had so providentially come up with him.

But one aim and object ruled all. This was to reach the ranch in advance of the Blanco Bandits; when Marion and the gold would not only be saved, but they would be able to wipe out the miscreants that so long had been a scourge, and hang their leader—the cowardly and infamous Hank Howard.

No mercy would be shown to the dastard, the assassin and thief, the abductor of the innocent. For such there could be only death!

Spurs were not spared by the party.

Mr. Morgan, also, nearly maintained the distance that had intervened between him and the rancheros; for the pleading words of his son kept him spurring constantly.

An hour later, both Manly and his father were mounted upon fresh horses, obtained at Dodd's Ranch, and were flying at breakneck speed on their mission. Less than an hour more passed before they rode at the head of the band of rancheros, one on either side of Dr. Brown.

Had there been the slightest probability of getting fresh mounts for all; it would have been done; but only two animals were in the corrals. The horses of the rancheros being therefore, fatigued, Mr. Morgan and Manly kept with their friends but a short time. They both dashed ahead, as the town of San Marcos was reached; and down the river they sped, the main band being not far behind them.

With all that, it was full two hours after midnight, before Manly Morgan, all alone—having distanced his father—dashed, at terrific speed, up to the veranda of Moore Ranch. He jerked his horse to a standstill, sprung to the ground, and then bounded into the hall, and up the stairs, to the chamber of Marion Moore.

But he had, in his heart, known, as he came near the ranch, that he was too late; for the ground was trampled by many horses, and the corral filled with saddle-marked mustangs—their sides showing the marks of foam and fatigue, as did their attitudes.

The torn-away steps, the dug-up earth, and the overturned furniture and general disarray spoke plainly. Too late, too late!

With set teeth, Manly Morgan staggered into Marion's apartment; and there, upon the floor, as if dead, lay his mother!

"God in Heaven!" he cried; "this too!"

He knelt, and raised her head.

Mrs. Morgan seemed to whisper something, and her eyes opened.

Was she dreaming?

No, that could not be. It was her son!

Weakly, and in broken accents, the poor woman uttered her thanksgiving.

Manly strove to assist his mother to the couch, but it was as the blind leading the blind; and had not Mr. Morgan appeared upon the scene, he would not have succeeded.

The young man said nothing. Everything around spoke—oh, so plainly!—of Marion.

He stood as if transfixed.

Could he live through it, he asked himself?

Mrs. Morgan was the first to speak.

"Poor Marion," she said; "that villain, Hank Howard, has carried her away. I know it! I know it! He had twenty men, or more, with him."

"Which way, mother?" gasped Manly.

"I cannot tell. I fell senseless, and our poor girl became unconscious too, when that coward kicked down the door."

Mr. Morgan gazed, speechless, at his son.

The latter could not have appeared worse, had he just arisen from the grave.

"Kicked in the door!" he repeated, in a strange voice. "Kicked in the door, and robbed me of her—of everything!"

Then, with an effort, he held himself more erect, his eyes blazed, and his teeth grated together. He was thirsting for vengeance.

A sight of him, at that moment, would have terrified Hank Howard. He sprung to the door, as the sound of hoofs came from below.

"Scatter, and find the trail!" he yelled, as he bounded down the stairs, out the door, and into his saddle. None could stop him.

"Circle, and find the trail, some of you! Let the others get fresh mounts for all."

"The demons have beat us so far; but no sleep, no food, until we meet them!"

"Men of San Marcos, Marion Moore has been carried off by Hank Howard and his band, and her gold also. Death, by the rope, to all that our bullets miss!"

A loud yell greeted this, as the rancheros hastened to obey Manly's order.

CHAPTER XXXII.

NEMESIS ON THE TRAIL.

MR. MORGAN had requested his wife to remain quiet, and await his return. He then ran down-stairs after his son, but Manly was already in the saddle, and yelling his orders to the rancheros. He was met by Dr. Brown, the former exclaiming:

"Doctor, my wife is up-stairs. We found her in Marion's room, unconscious. Hank Howard has been here, and taken the poor girl, and the gold, of course. Mrs. Morgan saw him, and recognized him. They broke the front door down, and Hank kicked in the door of the ladies' apartment. Then they both fainted."

"In that condition, Marion was borne away by that incarnate fiend. My son is almost insane. In the name of Heaven, what is to be done? The bandits, it seems, have taken fresh horses from the corrals."

"Go at once," was the reply, "and send men up to your ranch for horses. I'll attend to Mrs. Morgan. She must be removed to Aunt Dinah's cabin. This is no place for her."

"As to Manly, we can do nothing with him. Of course, we start as soon as possible in pursuit. Never fear; we'll rescue Marion, and wipe out the crowd. Do you remain here."

Dr. Brown hurriedly rattled off these directions, and then ran up the stairs.

Even then, Manly Morgan was on the east plain, riding along the trail, until satisfied as to the direction taken by the outlaws.

Then he sped back to the ranch.

Mr. Morgan ran, when the doctor left him, to the corrals. There he found matters not so bad as they might have been.

The bandits, in their haste, had neglected to drive out from the corral the fresh horses which they did not need; consequently, there were still more than enough to give the rancheros each a fresh mount.

And quickly were the equipments changed.

The rescuers and avengers had ridden through the town of San Marcos as they came, that the Blanco Bandits were at Moore Ranch. Many there had, in consequence, hastily saddled their horses, and sped after them; coming in at the ranch in pairs and singly, when, learning the true state of affairs, they resolved to be in at the death.

And as Manly had by this time found the trail and told which way it led, all had liberty to prepare for the pursuit.

The negroes were delighted at the return of the party, and hurried to provide them with refreshments; but, when they had been informed of the abduction of their young mistress, they filled the air with wailing and lamentations.

They declared that it must have been six hours since the outlaws were at the ranch, but this the rancheros knew to be untrue; for not more than two hours, at the most, could have elapsed. The darkies were no better judges of numbers, for they asserted that there had been "more'n five hundred debbils wid dat boss debbil, Mars' Hank!"

Not more than ten minutes were spent by the returning party in their preparations for the pursuit, before they were on the trail.

Mr. Morgan had been persuaded to remain at Moore Ranch and care for his wife, besides seeing that the slaves did not get in a worse demoralized condition than that in which they already were. Dr. Brown and Manly, after a consultation with the more intelligent of the rancheros, decided that the better plan for them would be to go straight to the cave of the bandits by the route on the north side of the San Marcos, following the trail made by the marauders when coming to the ranch. For Manly explained that the outlaws had planned to return to their stronghold, prepare for their flight, and then seek some other and more distant rendezvous.

When they reached the Devil's Backbone, Manly said he was confident he could lead the party into the retreat or surround it.

Yet, to steal in upon the following night, keeping themselves concealed in the woods from the time of their arrival, and then entering the defile on foot, would be the better plan. There

would be less danger to their lives in this, but it was terrible to think of Marion Moore in Hank Howard's power during that time.

Finally it was agreed that, upon reaching the vicinity of the bandits' stronghold, they would hold a conference and send spies near the retreat. They would, then, be governed by circumstances, the north trail being preferred, as there appeared no possible chance of their overtaking the outlaws.

The latter would reasonably expect pursuit by the south trail, believing that the rancheros would be on the lookout and discover them, while they could see the approach of their pursuers on the plain east of the Blanco Falls.

After this short council of war, the party led by Manly Morgan and Dr. Brown forded the river, took up the trail of the outlaws as the latter had come to Moore Ranch, and rode on their errand of rescue and revenge.

And most determined and merciless avengers they were!

Manly had been induced to swallow some strong coffee, and the doctor had made a hurried dressing of his wounds, so that the young man was in a far better condition physically than when he arrived at Moore Ranch. But his brain was in a whirl, and his very soul racked with anguish, and the most dreadful apprehension in connection with the unfortunate Marion.

On, through the remainder of the night, and for some hours of the day that followed, the rescuers and avengers rode; arriving, in the middle of the forenoon, at the wooded district to the northeast of the Devil's Backbone. There they drew rein, encamped, and the most skillful scouts set out on foot to reconnoiter the vicinity of the stronghold. They were accompanied by Manly Morgan.

Not until the Blanco Bandits reached the creek at which Juana Monteiro had encamped and reposed the night previous, did poor Marion recover from her faint. Then she realized that she was in the arms of Hank Howard, who was galloping amid a band of the most desperate-looking outlaws.

The poor maiden was now in that state, when nothing, however fearful and dangerous, appalls; and she gave no sign of recovery, but lay limp and listless, and with lids drooping to hide her eyes.

She wanted time to think. Yet, such a shock of horror had she experienced, when she first beheld Hank Howard at the door of her apartment, that her brain had, to a certain extent, been benumbed; and she found herself almost incapable of any true conception of the awful peril in which she was. And, all the while, she was conscious of this weakness.

The position she occupied was uncomfortable; and, had she been in the coils of a serpent, she could not have felt a greater horror and loathing. Yet she showed it not.

Then it was, that, like a ray of hope, once banished, but returning with a double brightness, she thought of the letter she had received from Juana Monteiro.

The Mexican girl had, in that communication, asserted that Manly Morgan was not dead, though ill and far away; and it now occurred to her that the only reasonable place to believe him to be under the circumstances, was in the stronghold of the Blanco Bandits. And to this she was being taken.

There was comfort in that, at least.

Then she thought of the last portion of the letter, which she had not at the time it was received, considered as she should have done.

Juana had there entreated her not to despair, even though she found herself in the position in which she then was. This led Marion to the conclusion, that the girl must have known, or at all events strongly suspected, that the Blanco Bandits, with Hank Howard, would raid Moore Ranch for the purpose of abducting her.

Besides, the hope held out by recalling the contents of Juana's letter, and the consciousness that, without much doubt, she was now being taken where Manly Morgan was, she knew that, as soon as her absence should be discovered, the body of rancheros that had been and were searching for trace of Manly, and to capture Hank Howard, would at once hasten on the trail of the outlaws. In that case she could scarcely doubt that she would be rescued.

Not a thought did Marion give to the gold. Indeed, her position was too terrible to allow of her thinking of aught else.

And where was Juana Monteiro?

The Mexican girl had waited, only to assure herself that pursuit of the outlaws would at once be made. Then she equipped her fleet and hardy pony, and, springing into her saddle, urged the animal free from the timber of the Rio San Marcos, and sped like an arrow westward and along the margin of the timber, keeping within its shadows.

She had decided to head for the retreat of the bandits, and to go by a direct route as straight west as was possible; thus keeping between the two trails.

Juana felt positive that she could gain the ridge known as the Devil's Backbone; for, from the words she had overheard from Paint

Pete, she had no doubt she could find the place, and trust to Providence to discover the cave of the Blanco Bandits.

Little doubt had she felt that she could, on her fleet pony, get to the point she aimed for before the outlaws gained their rendezvous.

And the daring Mexican girl did reach the rough, rocky section above Blanco Falls, and discovered from a brush-grown elevation, the bandits riding at speed toward a ridge, to which she accordingly headed, by winding ways; happening accidentally to enter the vale in which they had their horses secured, and from which Manly Morgan had appropriated the lame horse to his use.

From this secluded spot to the ravine, and up the same, Juana stealthily made her way; for there were any number of indications of the recent presence of the outlaws.

She thought it more than probable that some of the wretches had been left as guards; she was, therefore, quite cautious, for she realized her great danger. But she held her revolver ready, determined to shoot down any who might oppose her.

She gained the entrance to the cave unmolested, and stole along the dark passage; being able to peer into the large arched apartment, which was but faintly lit up by a dimly burning torch. There she discovered two men, rough in attire, and villainous in expression, both fast asleep upon blankets. As a bottle stood on the ground by the side of each, she understood the reason of their somnolence.

Juana knew that she had no time to lose, for the outlaws would soon be there. Seizing a fresh pine knot, she ignited it, and then proceeded to search for other passages.

Soon she came to that which led to the chamber from which Manly had escaped.

She found, however, that the entrance had been walled up—evidently done quite recently—and she at once set about making a breach in the wall sufficiently large to admit her, for she had ascertained that there was no other place of concealment.

Having accomplished her purpose, she crawled through the opening she had made.

Upon inspecting this inner cave, Juana found evidences sufficient to convince her that Manly Morgan, the captive of Paint Pete, had been there confined, and had been attended, in a primitive manner, during his illness.

Searching the walls, she found a natural alcove, and in this she concealed herself.

There it was quite dark, and Juana felt sure she could remain without being discovered, unless a special search was made for her, and, as her presence was unknown, this was not probable.

But suddenly she recollects that she had removed some of the stones to effect an entrance, and this would be noticed; so she crawled back into the passage, cast the stones through the aperture, returned, and then walled up the entrance as before.

It was a mystery to her why this cave-chamber had thus been sealed, especially when she found it had no occupant. At first she had believed there must be a captive inside; and, if she found this to be the case, she had determined on a release. But Manly Morgan—for Juana was convinced it had been he, was gone.

In five minutes more the Mexican girl was again in her biding-place.

As there was no other like chamber, her belief was that Hank Howard would place Marion Moore in this one for security.

This was just what Juana most desired, for it would then be in her power to save the poor girl from being further persecuted.

But her line of action must depend upon the events and circumstances to occur.

Not long had she been thus in hiding, when she heard boisterous and exultant yells, and a trembling sound, as of many animals trotting over a rocky trail.

The next moment she heard the two outlaws in the outer cave cursing, and then running to the entrance.

Shortly after, there was a confusion that was startling, in comparison with the silence that had previously reigned. The sound of men tramping along in heavy boots came from the main cave. Then the wall of loose stones was partly torn down, and Juana was satisfied that she had planned admirably, for she heard the voice of Hank Howard.

"There, my beauty," he said, "is your bridal chamber. Our nuptials shall be solemnized as soon as we can corral the proper person to officiate. Oh, here you are, Pete, with the ducats! Good for you!"

"Miss Moore, here is your dowry—our little capital with which to start housekeeping, after Pete, our friend here, has taken out his share. It will be safe here, Pete, and so will the girl."

"She has fainted, and it is best so. She'll come out all right presently."

Juana looked out from her covert, at these words. The torch gave out but a dim light, but it was sufficient to take in the main features of the impressive scene.

She saw Hank Howard supporting Marion Moore, who was pallid and tottering, to the couch of blankets. She knew that the maiden

had fainted, as soon as she had ached the couch. She could also see Paint Pete, bending under the weight of various pouches of buckskin, which he threw down in one corner, the chinks of coin sounding plainly as he did so.

Then the two villains departed, walling up the entrance when they had gone through.

"We must keep with the boys, Pete," said Hank: "and the first chance, give them the slip, with the gold and the girl. The sooner this turns up, the better for us."

"The rancheros of the San Marcos won't let the grass grow under their horses' hoofs, if once they get on the trail. They'll be here to-morrow, but we won't, old boy—not if there's a chance to slip out."

"Ye're mighty right, pard," agreed Pete. "We've played a big game, an' won. Reckon we-uns kin take ther stakes. Ef t'others gits rumtious, they'd blow our brains out, ter git our sheer. Mum's ther word!"

Then they were gone, and all was still.

That instant, Juana sprang to the side of Marion, and, with some liquor from a flask which she carried, soon restored the maiden to consciousness. The poor girl was almost overcome with amazement.

"Don't attempt to talk, Miss Moore," said Juana, in a cautious tone. "I have galloped on ahead of those demons, and got into their cave secretly. You and I must change places, and at once. I have a hiding place for you. Manly Morgan is alive. He will soon be here. He reached Moore Ranch soon after you were captured. He is now in these hills; and, at the head of a large force of rancheros.

"You will hide in an alcove, which I have discovered, and I will take your place; thus frustrating Hank Howard, should he attempt to escape with you before the arrival of Manly Morgan and his men."

"Do not hesitate. I'll save you, and Hank shall die by my hand! I have sworn it, and I'll keep my oath!"

Marion's astonishment was so great as to deprive her of the power of utterance.

Passively she consented to what Juana proposed. The change was soon made.

In ten minutes more, the deeply agitated girl, attired in the outer garments of Juana Monteiro, was crouched in the alcove, while the Mexican girl, attired as Marion Moore, lay upon the couch, her hands clasped over her face.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE END CROWNS THE WORK.

MANLY MORGAN, and the scouts with him, who had left the main command encamped in the woods, soon discovered that the bandits had returned, and that, but a short time before the avengers had reached the vicinity.

By stealing forward, and taking advantage of rocks, trees, and bushes, they were enabled to inspect the approaches to the cavern; and they thus discovered that the vale was filled with the foam-flecked horses, that had been stolen from Moore Ranch.

Such was the anguish of Manly Morgan, when he saw before him the stronghold in which Marion, unquestionably, then was, and in the power of the robber and assassin, Hank Howard, that he could not, he vowed, wait until the shades of night had fallen. Besides, he reasoned that the bandits would not expect their pursuers to arrive before the following morning, and they would be more gauded and watchful then than at the present time.

Upon returning to the camp, Manly urged an immediate attack, advocating the placing of secreted sentinels on the elevations above the cave, to give notice of any attempt of the fiend, Hank, to escape with his unhappy captive when the attack should be made.

This was at once done, and an immediate advance was made, two-thirds of the rancheros being on foot, the remainder leading horses, with which to pursue any of the outlaws who might obtain their animals, and seek flight.

And no better time could have been chosen, for the Blanco Bandits, hungry as wolves, as soon as they had staked their horses, after removing the equipments, had proceeded, each to do all in his power toward getting up a bountiful meal.

Paint Pete was so elated, that he produced a large demijohn of whisky, which he stated he had "kep' hid fer a rainy day," treating all hands to a big drink, and repeating it until the supply had been exhausted. All were merry, until one of the outlaws, who had been sent up the ridge to ascertain if there were any horsemen in view on the plains, came running in affright into the cave, and yelled:

"Ther ranchers o' ther San Marcos air right hyer, an' glidin' in onto the cave!"

Hank and Pete exchanged significant glances. Then the former called out:

"Run, men, and secure the horses, or we are lost! Lead them into the ravine and stand your ground. Then shoot to kill, or they'll corral us!"

It needed no second order, for all knew that safety depended upon their steeds, and that, if hard pressed, their only hope would be in a daring dash or charge on horseback through their foes, and then a flight westward. An instant

after the order, the cave was clear of all except the two leaders.

"Have you got our nags in the valley all right?" yelled Hank, in great excitement.

"Ya-as," was Pete's reply. "Come on! Git yer gal, an' I'll tend ter the gold!"

Paint Pete rushed into the passage, to the cave-chamber, hurling the rocks that formed the wall to the right and left, unmindful of bruised hands.

"Hurry, Pete! We'll beat them all," said his companion. "You bet I've arranged it."

In a minute more, the pair dashed out from the chamber; Hank bearing Juana, whom he believed to be Marion. The Mexican girl had wound a scarf partly over her face, and was feigning insensibility.

Pete followed, literally staggering under the weight of the pouches of gold.

When they had cleared the entrance of the cave, Paint Pete led the way, and they turned abruptly to the right, passing along between walls of rock, in a way through which but one man could go at a time.

In ten minutes, they were upon horses, and dashing down a ravine from which they passed to more open ground.

But, before they had covered many yards of the clear space between the ridge and a motte of low trees, a wild shout arose on their right, and they saw that they had been observed by the rancheros, who had not as yet reached the ridge.

Among those who had discovered the pair was Manly Morgan, who sprang upon the nearest horse which was being led by a San Marcos man.

With a vengeful cry, at the same time jerking his bowie knife—for he feared to use his revolver—Manly drove spurs, and sped like the wind in pursuit, feeling confident he saw his Marion being carried off by Hank Howard.

Dr. Brown rode rapidly in the rear of Manly, furious for revenge.

But the strangest event then happened. Hank Howard became paralyzed with terror, when he saw Manly Morgan, whom he had believed food for the fishes in the Rio San Marcos, now leading his pursuers. He halted at the sight.

Then he recalled some words of Pete's that had appeared suspicious at the time, but which had been soon forgotten, he having thought them not worth his notice. He now realized their meaning to the full.

Morgan was dashing toward him, vengeance in his eye and a gleaming bowie in his hand.

Paint Pete was now far in the lead.

All that Hank had planned for, and for which he had outlawed himself, was about to be torn from him!

Not alone this, but an ignominious death stared him in the face.

He clasped the woman's form closer to his breast, vowing that through her—through Marion Moore—he would defeat the avenger even now!

He drove deep his spurs, and drew his knife, raising the blade high over the breast of his captive. A yell of triumph broke from the wretch's lips, as, with a bitter cry of despair, Morgan halted, appalled at the fearful possibilities of the moment, for he believed Hank Howard capable of slaying Marion Moore, in his desperation.

But the surprises were not over.

Another event now occurred, which caused the amazed and relieved Manly to spur desperately forward.

The captive girl suddenly sprung upward, and, clutching the hand of her abductor, in an instant wrenched the weapon from his grasp. So paralyzed was he when he beheld, as the scarf was cast aside, none other than Juana Monteiro—whom he had believed in San Antonio, if not dead—that he stared in utter helplessness.

The black eyes of the Mexican girl were gleaming, her teeth were clinched, and her handsome face contorted with a look of the most vengeful fury.

The knife descended, but with a fierce yell of terror he threw himself backward, and the blade was buried in his shoulder. The next moment Juana slipped from his embrace, and he fell from his saddle upon the sward, the horse galloping away in fright as several revolver-shots rung in the wood.

Then, as Manly Morgan dashed up and alighted beside Juana in the greatest wonder, out from the shades bounded the horse of Paint Pete, the wounded outlaw clinging to the saddle, and pouches of gold dropping to the earth!

Pete fell to the ground, quite near Hank, who was more frightened than injured. The doctor then appeared upon the scene. It was a strange sight, indeed.

"Bind the ruffians! The ropes are ready for them!" cried Dr. Brown, spring from his horse, lariat in his hand.

Manly was still gazing at Juana. Then the Mexican girl spoke:

"Do not be concerned about Marion Moore," she said. "I have exchanged clothes with her, to save her from that villain, who has just es-

caped me. But he shall die, Mr. Morgan, and he must die by my hand. I have sworn it and you must let me keep my vow. My wrongs are greater than yours."

Manly grasped her hand.

"You are a true woman," he said; "but where is Miss Moore?"

"In a cave-chamber adjoining the main cavern of the Blanco Bandits," was the reply. "I hid her there. She is safe for a while, but she may be discovered."

"Why are you wasting time? Bind that ruffian, that monster! He is my captive."

With promptness, Manly Morgan secured the wrists of Hank Howard, who was placed upon the horse that had been ridden by Manly, and Pete upon that of the doctor; both being made fast to the saddles.

Then the party proceeded, in haste, to the ridge, from which the sound of rapid firing, both of revolvers and rifles, was now heard.

Dr. Brown made sure of the gold, before departing, by casting the bag into the bushes.

Soon the party reached the vale, near the entrance of the ravine.

The two captives were made sure of, by their horses being secured to trees; when Juana, who seemed afraid of nothing, explained the situation of the cave-chamber, and then, with revolver in hand, stood guard over Paint Pete and Hank Howard.

Manly and the doctor then led a desperate charge up the ravine, forcing all the outlaws into the main cave who had not already fallen before the rifles and revolvers of the furious rancheros.

Then it was simply a massacre.

Some rushed into the inner cave, tearing down the walls, but closely followed by Dr. Brown and Manly, who shot them down without mercy.

Seizing a torch, Manly was not long in finding the alcove, where, terrified beyond expression, crouched the darling of his heart. Marion had heard his voice, and knew that he was coming to her rescue. Catching her up in his arms, the young man rushed from the dark cavern, from that scene of carnage, bearing her with him.

Thus he made his way to the little vale, and there a fearful sight met his view. A mob of rancheros were dragging Hank and Pete toward a tree, and the Mexican girl was following them, a noosed rope in her hands. The doctor came up with a second, and Manly Morgan, leaving his charge in a thicket, followed him.

Fierce and vengeful cries filled the air.

Soon all was over with Paint Pete and Hancock Howard, as far as this world was concerned. Juana Monteiro was permitted to have the revenge for which she had toiled and waited. Her hand it was that cast the noose over her victim's head.

The Mexican girl had kept her oath.

The Blanco Bandits were exterminated.

The gold was regained.

Better, far better than all, Marion Moore, the much wronged and bereaved one, was safe—safe in the protecting arms of one who would shield her, even to the end.

Little more may be said in connection with our story.

The avengers and rescuers returned to the Rio San Marcos, with Marion and the legacy complete, which had been so desperately fought for.

Four killed and six wounded, made up the list of casualties to the rancheros; but the scourges of that section, the Blanco Bandits, were annihilated. And Hank Howard had received his just deserts.

But a most sad and painful thing was yet to happen, for, when the band of rancheros reached Howard Ranch, the fearful facts had to be made known.

As they came in sight, poor old Mr. Howard ran out, to ascertain if Manly Morgan had been found; and then, his worst fears in regard to his own son were realized. The awful truth could not be kept from him. It was the finishing stroke.

Ere they rode on, the silver cord was loosed, and the unhappy father's sorrows were at an end.

The rancheros scattered to their homes, to meet on the morrow and bury their dead.

On the same day, the body of old Mose was laid to rest at last.

But who could picture the happiness at Morgan Ranch, when the son was received as from the grave?

Who can begin to describe the happiness that was Manly's and Marion's when, three months later, they were united in marriage?

Moore Ranch was then the scene of great festivities. Aunt Dinah superintended the culinary department, and all who had taken part in the rescue of the lady of the ranch were present on the occasion.

Dr. Brown and Juana Monteiro occupied posts of honor at the wedding banquet, and the latter was afterward induced to make Moore Ranch her home, and once more was contented, if not happy, after the great sufferings that had been hers through the perfidy of Hank Howard, the Captain—for a day—of the Blanco Bandits.

THE END.

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